

THESIS

FROM PYRRHONISM TO MADHYAMAKA: PARADOXICAL SOLUTIONS TO SKEPTICAL PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

FROM PYRRHONISM TO MADHYAMAKA: PARADOXICAL SOLUTIONS TO SKEPTICAL PROBLEMS

Skepticism as a philosophical school of thought is best embodied by Greek Pyrrhonism and Indian Madhyamaka. Between these two schools, however, Pyrrhonism is bogged down on issues that Madhyamaka is not. For Greek Pyrrhonism, scholarship revolves around the issue that skeptics cannot have beliefs, and yet this is something they believe. For Indian Madhyamaka, scholarship points towards a skeptical position that is consistently paradoxical. This paper will first explore the discussion on Sextus Empiricus' Pyrrhonism as established by Michael Frede, Myles Burnyeat, and Jonathan Barnes. From there, a closer look at Aristotle, Anselm, and Immanuel Kant will show that paradoxes are more common in philosophy than normally acknowledged. An in-depth discussion of Nāgārjuna and Śāntideva's Madhyamaka skepticism using interpretations from Jay Garfield and Graham Priest will illustrate how paradoxes at the limits of thought can correctly capture skepticism. Using the understanding of Madhyamaka, the debate on Pyrrhonism and beliefs will be shown to be correctly paradoxical. Finally, the paper will conclude that skepticism itself not only paradoxical, but an impressive and valuable philosophical position.

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CHAPTER 1

1.1 Introduction

Certitude permeates human life. We are certain of how far away the sun is, certain that everything is made of atoms, certain that we can cross the oceans. Even on mundane levels we are certain what day it is, where we live, and that burritos are delicious. Doubt does not creep into the framework of our daily lives. I am not stopped by sudden pangs of uncertainty when I reach for my coffee cup—I reach and drink with the conviction of a zealot. But beneath our confident navigation of the world lies murky waters. Doubt presses at the edges of certainty and drives us to investigate further into the limits of our existence. As gaps in knowledge are filled new gaps are revealed and doubt incites us to explore ever onward. Driven by doubt, we seek certitude—a paradoxical relationship of attempting to know the unknown.

In the journey for knowledge, skeptics stand as the champions of doubt. In classical antiquity, the birthplace of Western skepticism, the skeptics left no stone of their contemporary's arguments unturned. Every position and response levied at them, the skeptics utilized their greatest tool to turn those positions back again. Their diligent devotion to seeking the truth was so complete that some skeptics claimed that nothing could ever satisfy the requirements for truth and knowledge. In true skeptic fashion, some even doubted that position.

In ancient Greece, the skeptics were not a unified school. Two major positions existed that had one major split between them. Academic skeptics, with their most notable adherent being Carneades, claimed that complete certitude was impossible, and so nothing could be absolutely known to be true or false. Pyrrhonian skeptics, with their famous adherent being Sextus Empiricus, believed, like Academics, that certitude was impossible. But unlike Academics, Pyrrhonians also claimed that even a good reason to believe something could not be established, and so nothing at all could be taken to be true or false.

Both schools agreed that truth and legitimate knowledge required certainty and that certainty could not be established. Academics would go on to claim that despite ultimate truths being unknowable, we can still have putative knowledge of or beliefs about more basic things in our lives. Pyrrhonians, however, would not grant this further claim of putative knowledge as being acceptable for a skeptic. Pyrrhonians applied their doubt viciously to every level of knowledge, ultimate and trivial, showing that none of it escaped doubt. No good skeptic would be caught truly believing something even as trivial as the deliciousness of burritos.

Here, however, Pyrrhonians run into a quagmire. In their attempt to avoid believing anything false, they would have to avoid believing all together. Doubt blanketed everything so completely that belief itself cannot escape falsehoods. Opponents of skepticism attacked Pyrrhonians on this radical position—beliefs are unavoidable in life and to legitimately jettison all beliefs and continue to live like a human is impossible. Pyrrhonian skepticism may ultimately be an unattainable position.

The skeptical discussion for the Greeks, or at the very least for the Pyrrhonians, rested on how belief was understood. Modern scholars still attempt to unravel the knots tied by Pyrrhonian skepticism and their concept of belief. Skepticism itself may require these ancient issues be resolved before it can legitimately stand as a major school of thought. This juncture, however, is not where the debate on skepticism ends. Across traditions and across the world in ancient India, skepticism also had its champions.

The ancient Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna defended a highly skeptical school of Buddhist thought called Madhyamaka. While Madhyamaka's ultimate motivation was attaining enlightenment rather than truth or knowledge, its commitment to finding truth and avoiding falsehoods would have made the Greeks blush. Mādhyamika challenged the existence of souls, causation, and even substance itself. They claimed that everything we see and experience in our daily lives is illusion that needs to be overcome if we hope to have a chance at peace. To believe in falsehoods is to bind ourselves to suffering. Our only liberation lies in discovering the

truths of reality and seeing it as it really is. Such was their conviction to truth that even one's own existence could not be trusted.

Madhyamaka was not without its opponents. While ancient Indians agreed that enlightenment was the goal of our philosophical pursuits, it was Madhyamaka that proposed that the existence of everything could be shown to be illusion and ultimately worthy of rejection. This radical conclusion was challenged by some who claimed, as the Yogācāra did, that one could not doubt the mind and that the mind was in fact necessary. Others, like the Nyāya, challenged the consistency of Madhyamaka logic, charging it with contradiction and nihilism.

While in the West contradictions were taken to be death blows to a theory, in the East some contradictions were taken only as momentary hurdles. When Madhyamaka theory quickly approached paradoxes at the limit of thought and expression, Nāgārjuna worked to show that not only were contradictions inevitable at the edges of theory, but that those contradictions were veridical, meaning here that they accurately describe how the theory works, and ultimately are necessary for Indian skepticism to function at all. Madhyamaka thought was not only paradoxical, it was true. Skepticism, in the hands of Madhyamaka, had legitimate force.

Skepticism, as a school of thought itself, now stands in two forms: one Greek, beholden to the old Western tradition of non-contradiction and bogged down in attempting to dissolve possible contradictions between theory and practice; and one Indian, brandishing paradox and contradiction as impressive weapons of discourse and blending theory and practice into an authentic philosophy of life. This split within skepticism hints that skepticism has more work to do internally, across traditions, before it can stand again on its own feet as a goliath of philosophical thought.

Within this look at skepticism, then, the party that is left wanting seems to be Pyrrhonism. Its foundation is strong but gets trapped in discussions of what beliefs are. The discussion of beliefs does not reflect the motivation for the skeptical pursuit and so appears as if Pyrrhonism got sidetracked by distinction mongering in service of avoiding contradictions.

Madhyamaka, however, was able to resolve the charges of contradiction by accepting the contradictions and showing that they were veridical. This allows Madhyamaka to retain the force of skepticism and promote it to its fullest.

It will be the first task of this paper to discuss the internal Pyrrhonian debate and how it led to a circling discussion on belief. Possible interpretations of Pyrrhonism will be explored, leading to an impasse as to which interpretation stands as the clearest, ultimately hinting at a possible paradoxical resolution. The second task will be to expose the Western philosophical tradition's relationship with paradox and motivate the possibility of accepting paradox within a tradition that so vehemently avoided contradiction for so long. Once familiar with paradox, Madhyamaka skepticism will be the guide to understanding how paradox can be a veridical position and a viable solution to issues at the limit of human ability. Finally, the strategies of Madhyamaka will be applied to Pyrrhonism in an effort to show how Pyrrhonism need not be muddied by discussions of belief and that a consistent solution for the skeptic does lie within paradox.

1.2 Pyrrhonism

Pyrrhonism takes its namesake from Pyrrho of Elis, who lived around the time of Aristotle. It is difficult to say what exactly Pyrrho thought because he, like Socrates, wrote nothing himself. His student Timon recorded much of Pyrrho's philosophies and teachings but only fragments remain of Timon's work. From those fragments it seems that Pyrrho considered our perceptions and beliefs to be suspect and that the world was "unfathomable and undeterminable."¹ Faced with a world that human intellect could not penetrate, Pyrrho withheld all judgments, neither assenting nor dissenting to what he perceived. This suspension of belief carried with it a peace of mind that defines ultimate human happiness.² The ancient Greek word for this state of peace is *ataraxia*. Unlike its common English translation of 'tranquility,' which

¹ Annas, J. & Barnes, J. (eds.) (2000). *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism*. Cambridge University Press. Pg. xvii.

² *Ibid.* pg. xxvii.

has a very positive connotation, in ancient Greek *ataraxia* is a negation. The root word *taraxia* closely translates to ‘perturbed,’ ‘bothered,’ or ‘disturbed,’ with *a-* being a prefix that denotes negation, or literally ‘not.’ Thus, *ataraxia* is better understood as a state of being unperturbed or unbothered rather than a state of positive tranquility. It is more neutral in its meaning than the English ‘tranquility,’ but denotes a state of impenetrable calm and peace—a state that, for the Greeks, could not be outdone. Withholding all judgements is Pyrrho’s path to *ataraxia*.

Pyrrho’s contemporary impact is hard to measure. While the tradition he inspired never fully disappeared in antiquity, there is little reference to it between Pyrrho’s lifetime and that of the 1st century BCE Pyrrhonian Aenesidemus. This may be in part because Pyrrhonism has no unifying doctrines or established school. Indeed, a school of skepticism sounds just as odd as a church of atheism—the establishment does not match the creed—as the torch of skepticism is not one that compels its adherents to preach in the streets. But Pyrrhonism’s creed did continue to survive in Greece, as is evident by Aenesidemus. He was a student enrolled in the Academy; before Aenesidemus arrived at the Academy, it had been turned towards a skeptical persuasion first by Arcesilaus, then afterward maintained by Carneades. Despite having a skeptical tone, the school remained largely Platonist. This combination of Platonism and skepticism gave rise to the Academic skeptics (a tradition which is somewhat mystifying philosophically).³ When Aenesidemus arrived at the Academy, it had slipped from its stance as a skeptical Platonist school and was defending a kind of diluted Stoicism.⁴ Disillusioned with the weakened skepticism of the Academy, Aenesidemus sought to revive skepticism and so turned to the teachings of Pyrrho.

³ It is not this paper’s intention to critique or explain the Academic skeptic’s standpoint in any great detail. However, the combination of Platonism and skepticism is not an easy position to take. While Plato’s own theories seem difficult at best to square with the suspension of judgement, we do not know how exactly the Academics took to the task. Arcesilaus and Carneades, like Pyrrho, did not write anything down. (Annas, J. & Barnes, J. (eds.) (2000) pg. xviii).

⁴ While Stoicism has its skeptical influences, it is not itself a skeptical school. Stoicism sought to suspend judgment of the world but the Stoic suspension is motivated by virtue, not by knowledge or truth. In contrast, skeptical suspension is not primarily concerned with virtue because it establishes its worries epistemically, not ethically.

From what can be discerned by the summaries of Aenesidemus' work by Photius, a 9th century patriarch of Constantinople, they provided the basis from which Sextus Empiricus wrote his own *Outlines of Skepticism (PH)* in the second century CE. Sextus' work is the primary source material for our understanding of Pyrrhonism.⁵ While Sextus himself was relatively unremarkable in the ancient world, what he distilled and compiled of ancient skepticism is the best window that we now have into the worlds of Pyrrho, Timon, and Aenesidemus. By using Sextus' work we can establish Pyrrhonian positions and arguments, forming a picture of what serious skepticism would have looked like.

Sextus begins *PH* by stating that when epistemic investigations are undertaken there are three outcomes: "discovery, or a denial of discovery and a confession of inapprehensibility, or else a continuation of investigation."⁶ Investigation, then, delivers truth, a denial of knowledge, or more investigation. According to Sextus, those who claim to have discovered truth are dogmatists, those who deny knowledge are Academics, and those who continue investigating are skeptics. Since skepticism's primary motivation is epistemic, nothing besides truth *qua* truth and absolutely certain knowledge will satisfy the skeptic. This is why those who claim to have discovered something are called, albeit in an *ad hominem* tone, dogmatists—according to the skeptic, they claim something to be true on insufficient or incoherent grounds. While the majority of philosophical positions fall somewhere on the dogmatist scale, Sextus' examples of dogmatist schools of thought include Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics.⁷ The Academics, who include Carneades, receive their own category because they do not claim any specific dogmatic position to be true, but rather claim that nothing can be apprehended. The Pyrrhonians see this as a suspicious claim because in order to say that apprehension is unattainable, one would have to apprehend that nothing is apprehensible. What is left, then, is the continuation of investigation—the skeptical persuasion.

⁵ *Ibid.* pg. xi.

⁶ *Ibid.* pg. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.* pg. 3.

The skeptical persuasion is defined by Sextus as an ability to set out all opposing positions in such a way so they are equipollent, leading the skeptic to see that neither side can be assented to, and so the skeptic comes “first to suspension of judgement and afterwards to tranquility.”⁸ In any scenario a skeptic enters, they are able to build and defend equally strong arguments on *both* sides of the argument. While investigating epistemic positions, a skeptic speaks in non-declarative, descriptive ways. The skeptic avoids making dogmatic assertions about the world because skeptics “report descriptively on each item according to how it appears to us at the time.”⁹ By only describing how things *seem* at any given time, the skeptic does not have to defend or believe that anything they describe is factually true of the world. Speaking this way allows the skeptic to neither reject nor posit anything in regard to an argument.¹⁰ With either side being no more convincing than the opposite side, and the skeptic having staked no claims in the argument other than investigation of its truth, the skeptic withholds judgement as to which position should be accepted. If the skeptic is skilled enough in their ability to see the equipollence in all investigations, then they enter a state of *ataraxia*. Without any positions rejected or posited, no discovery, refutation, or revelation disturbs the skeptic. Having suspended judgement on the question, the skeptic is unperturbed by the dispute for they have nothing bearing on its resolution or lingering indefinite indeterminacy. Tranquility, or rather unperturbedness, is the skeptic’s state of mind as they continue to investigate the world.

Given this sketch of how a Pyrrhonian navigates the world, much of the skeptic’s position lies within how assent and belief are understood. To better illustrate how a skeptic approaches these concepts and how they are to be applied to the world, a more in-depth look at these terms will be undertaken.

⁸ *Ibid.* pg. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.* pg. 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pg. 5.

1.3 Assent and Belief

The original skeptical motivation for equipollence, withholding assent, and suspending judgement on impressions is so the skeptic can avoid believing falsehoods. Impressions are experiences of the world, either from the senses or from the intellect, and make the world appear a certain way. The world is discovered through impressions, but they can be illusory or false. Faulty sense organs, opposing viewpoints, and untrustworthy origins undermine the possible veridical status of impressions. One should not believe impressions show the world as it really is—to do so is to commit a disastrous sin: believing something false to be true.

This position, that false beliefs are to be avoided at all costs, was inherited by the skeptics from the Stoics, who believed that one's virtue was determined by assenting to only true, veridical impressions. The Stoics claimed that we do sometimes have true impressions, which they classified as cataleptic impressions. In the words of the ancient biographer Diogenes Laertius, a cataleptic impression is "that which comes from something existent and is in accordance with the existent thing itself."¹¹ Cataleptic impressions are the criterion of truth because they arise from existence itself and cannot be incorrect. In order to gain knowledge, one needs to train the mind to correctly identify and assent to veridical cataleptic impressions while either withholding assent from or not assenting to false impressions. Assent, then, is a kind of positive epistemic action. When one experiences an impression, assenting to it is accepting that the impression is true and indicative of reality. By assenting to an impression, one is taking that impression at face value. Since impressions are the medium through which we discover reality, it is essential that some criteria are established to distinguish false impressions from true impressions. The skeptic's strategy for determining an impression's truth is by way of the Ten and Five Modes of skepticism.¹²

¹¹ Hankinson, J. R.. "Stoic Epistemology" (2003). In *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics* (2003) edited by Inwood, B.. Cambridge University Press. Pg. 60.

¹² There are also the Two Modes and Eight Modes. The Two Modes are an attempt to combine the Ten and Five Modes but strangely omit the Mode of Hypothesis. See Barnes, 1990 for more on this topic. The Eight Modes function similarly to the Ten Modes but are specifically applied in instances of identifying causes. See Hankinson,

The Ten Modes receive the most attention and discussion in Sextus' *PH*, but all share a common characteristic: the ability to present one perception-based argument with an equal but opposite perception-based argument. The Ten Modes invoke the use of perceptual discrepancies ranging from variations among animals, to admixtures, to circumstance. The primary strategy of these modes is to exploit the relativity that is inherent in the observation of reality. Each person has a unique, subjective perspective and so to establish sweeping ontological or metaphysical claims about the world based on relativistic viewpoints is quintessentially dogmatic. The structure of each of the Ten Modes follows this framework:¹³

x appears F in S	x appears F^* in S^*
Therefore, x is F	Therefore, x is F^*

The first dogmatic claim is that something (x) appears to be such a way (F) from a certain perspective (S). From this observation, the dogmatist can conclude that the thing (x) is in fact the way it appears to be (F). The skeptic, by applying the Ten Modes, can construct the opposing statement that the same thing (x) appears to be a different way (F^*) from a different perspective (S^*). From this the skeptic can conclude by using the same argument style the exact opposite of the dogmatist; that the thing (x) is in fact a different way (F^*).¹⁴ An example that utilizes this method would have the following schema:

Honey (x) is perceived to be sweet (F) by healthy people (S)
Therefore, honey (x) is sweet (F).
Honey (x) is perceived to be bitter (F^*) by jaundiced people (S^*)
Therefore, honey (x) is bitter (F^*).

1995 for more discussion on the Eight Modes. While these sets of Modes are interesting, the Ten and Five Modes are the strongest and most complete sets of practical skepticism and so will be the primary focus of this current section.

¹³ Morison, B., 2011, "The Logical Structure of the Sceptic's Opposition", *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, XL (*Essays in Memory of Michael Frede*), 265–295.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 265-295

Any argument that takes this form can have an equipollent argument to the opposite. The Ten Modes, then, serve as strategies to counter any argument based on perception, honing in on the relativistic aspect of human experience.

The Five Modes do not get as much discussion as the Ten Modes, but put forward a more sophisticated picture of how skeptics can counter the positions of dogmatists. The Five Modes are: the Mode of Dispute, the Mode of Regress, the Mode of Relativity, the Mode of Hypothesis, and the Mode of Reciprocity.¹⁵ The Mode of Dispute and the Mode of Relativity encompass the spirit of the Ten Modes in that they both appeal to the relativity of perspective and our inability to adjudicate between them. The other three modes, however, point toward the consequences of classical epistemological process. The Greeks considered three main methods to ground one's knowledge.¹⁶ The first strategy is to continually give reasons for a proposition indefinitely. While this strategy may be impractical, theoretically it is possible to give an infinite amount of reasons to continually defend one's original proposition. The second strategy is to give reasons for the proposition, ultimately grounding the chain of reasoning in some base-level axiom or hypothesis. This strategy attempts to provide a foundation for the original proposition, stopping the chain of reasons at some basic point. The third strategy provides reasons for the original proposition but eventually cycles around to the original claim as being grounds for itself. Within a claim's chain of defending reasons lies the claim itself, making its justification circular.

Three of Sextus' Five Modes challenge these strategies of proving knowledge and provide the skeptic with an objection to dogmatic claims based on the structure of how the claim is being supported. The Mode of Regress attacks infinite justification, claiming that "we have no point from which to begin to establish anything,"¹⁷ leaving the strategy of infinite justification

¹⁵ Annas, J. & Barnes, J. (eds.) (2000). pg. 40-41.

¹⁶ These three outcomes are classically referred to as the Agrippan Trilemma. The three horns are known as infinitism, foundationalism, and coherentism in modern epistemology.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 41.

unable to establish any of its reasons as able to stand on their own. If reason *B* justifies proposition *A*, and reason *C* justifies reason *B*, and reason *D* justifies reason *C*... *ad infinitum*, then no single reason can give sufficient defense for another because it itself requires further justification. Without somewhere to establish one's justification, no reasoning can get off the ground. The Mode of Hypothesis attacks the strategy of providing a base-level axiom, claiming that anything given as an axiom is assumed "simply and without proof in virtue of a concession."¹⁸ This objection states that axioms are themselves assumed and without sufficient justification for why they are acceptable as foundational reasons. The Mode of Reciprocity challenges the circular strategy, claiming that if propositions cycle around in order to justify themselves, then nothing in the chain can be fully justified because no one proposition can establish another. For example, if *A* justifies *B*, and *B* justifies *A*, then one fails to establish either *A* or *B*. The justification for both continues to circle around forever, never landing on one truly justifying the other. These three modes are particularly potent because they reveal flaws in how knowledge is proved, rather than only attacking the claims. By being able to target the flaws in the method of dogmatic claims, the skeptics have built a far stronger position for themselves.

Ultimately, the Modes reveal that we cannot be sure that we really have true impressions of the world. No matter what claim or strategy someone employs to show that a piece of knowledge or a certain proposition is actually true of the world, skeptics can utilize the modes to find a flaw in the reasoning or build an equipollent but opposing position. If knowledge and truth rely on assent only to veridical impressions of the world (impressions that the Stoics would understand to be cataleptic), then one must be able to determine how and why such impressions are representative of reality. If an impression contains even a shred of doubt as to its cataleptic status, then it cannot be taken to be absolutely true of reality and so fails to be cataleptic, thus losing its status as an impression worth assenting to. By brandishing the Modes

¹⁸ *Ibid*, pg. 41.

and applying them generously, the skeptic sees that equally good arguments can be made for and against an impression's status as cataleptic, leaving no impression as worthy of assent. The remaining viable option to the truth- and knowledge-loving skeptic is to withhold assent to all matters of inquiry.

Let us consider how this strategy would look if embodied by an individual. Imagine a Pyrrhonian skeptic named Dion. Dion is well versed in skepticism and is of the skeptical persuasion. He has an experience and notes that it gives him a particular impression of the world. Dion thinks that this impression of the world is nothing more than an impression, and so he cannot tell if it reveals the world as it truly is or not. He further notes that this impression has made the world appear to him to be a certain way. Appearances and impressions are not sufficient for Dion since he is searching for truth and knowledge of the world. He resolves to inquire further into his experience. He sets the various Modes onto his impression to sort through possible ways in which his impression may be reliable or unreliable, veridical or fallible. Through rational exercise Dion has found that his impression has good reasons to be true and good reasons to be false. He has arrived at equipollence and so cannot rationally determine whether he should assent to his experience being true or false. If Dion decides to assent to his impression being true or false despite having arrived at equipollence, then it is possible that he believes something false. Believing something false could have harmful consequences for Dion's life, and so to avoid dogmatism, he withholds assent to the question of whether or not his impression is true or not—his mind is quiet on the subject. He does not worry if he mistakenly assents to something false because he has completely withheld assent. Dion now finds himself in a state of *ataraxia*, or unperturbedness, toward the question of whether his experience is true or false. Dion does not dispute the way that the impression appears to him, rather he suspends judgement as to whether or not that impression is true of reality itself. He can recognize the impression as making reality appear a certain way without (possibly falsely) believing that the world is in fact the way it seems.

Dion's account illustrates that the skeptic is not challenging how experiences are had, nor is the skeptic challenging that experiences report the world in a certain way. It is true that reality appears to be a certain way—skeptics have no quarrel with appearances and impressions themselves. Indeed, it is impressions that guide skeptics through life, leading them to food and water. It is the dogmatic beliefs that impressions are revealing reality that the skeptic finds preposterous. One cannot reach past our experiences and discover how existence truly is—one must work from what one has. And what one has are the experiences and impressions of the world as it appears to us. If one can successfully avoid dogmatism and withhold assent on all matters, then one does not need to face the consequences of believing false things. The rewards of not needing to worry about one's epistemic commitments are tranquility and peace of mind.

With tranquility on the line, a more precise and careful look at how a Pyrrhonian achieves their suspension of judgement is necessary. The way the Pyrrhonians understand assent and belief is crucial to how they build and defend their position. Two major interpretations of how to understand Pyrrhonian skepticism have emerged. Following Jonathan Barnes' endorsed nomenclature, one interpretation is that of *urbane Pyrrhonism* and one is of *rustic Pyrrhonism*.¹⁹ The urbane Pyrrhonist assents to ordinary beliefs while suspending judgement on philosophical and scientific beliefs, while a rustic Pyrrhonist has no beliefs whatsoever.²⁰

These two interpretations, while based upon the same source material, lead to remarkably different understandings of Pyrrhonism. Both urbane and rustic interpretations draw directly from Sextus' text. The urbane reader finds support in Sextus' claims that the Pyrrhonian defends common sense, seeking to rid reason of dogmatic assertions while retaining the reason

¹⁹ Barnes, J. (1982), "The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist." In *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy* edited by Burnyeat, M. & Frede, M. (1997). Hackett. pg. 61.

²⁰ *Ibid.* pgs. 61-62.

of ordinary human life.²¹ Rustic readers look toward the passages where Sextus seeks to dismantle all the beliefs one may have, be them ordinary or not. Additionally, the rustic reading better matches the descriptions the Pyrrhonian's opponents give of the skeptical position of Sextus and his ilk. Urbane Pyrrhonism seeks to cut a line between intense intellectual inquiry and the common carefree cadence of the conventional—an urbane skeptic accepts the rules of the commons but dares not venture into the realm of dogma. Rustic Pyrrhonism leaves no stone unturned—no belief, however mundane or innocuous, escapes the rustic skeptic's rational dominion. The rustic skeptic, by way of serious and robust skeptical persuasion, turns the field of human knowledge into an equipollent arena of opposing arguments.²²

The key move, then, in the discussion of how to understand Pyrrhonism lies within the question of whether Pyrrhonism is better understood as urbane or rustic. Does the skeptic make room for certain kinds of beliefs within their skepticism, or do they discard them all? In the following section, a more in-depth look at the merits of both interpretations is undertaken.

1.4 Frede's Urbane and Burnyeat's Rustic Pyrrhonism

It is unclear in Sextus' writing whether assent and belief are specifically different or not. His language surrounding assenting to impressions and beliefs is often interwoven and interchanged. In some places assent and belief seem to be synonymous and in others they seem to denote specifically different epistemic activities. Sextus directly addresses a skeptic's beliefs in *PH*:

- I.13. When we say that skeptics do not hold beliefs, we do not take 'belief' in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that belief is acquiescing in something; for skeptics assent to the feelings forced upon them by appearances—for example, they would not say, when heated or chilled, 'I think I am not heated (or chilled).' Rather, we say that they do not hold beliefs in the sense in which some say that belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences; for Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything unclear.²³

²¹ *Ibid.* pg. 62.

²² *Ibid.* pg. 62.

²³ All Sextus Empiricus translations taken from Annas, J. & Barnes, J. (eds.) (2000) unless otherwise indicated.

Two kinds of belief are mentioned in this passage. The first kind deals with immediate and basic impressions like those of hot and cold. If a skeptic is cold, they would not declare that they are in fact not cold. A skeptic would assent to the impression that it seems that they are cold. But if the skeptic is pushed to give an account of what it really means for him to be cold, the skeptic would resist and withhold assent to that further inquiry. What “cold,” “coldness,” or “being cold” means in a metaphysical or scientific sense is to ask questions about reality that our impressions or rationality cannot sufficiently grasp. On this unclear object of investigation, the skeptic remains silent.

Michael Frede takes this passage from Sextus to be essential to understanding the Pyrrhonian’s position on belief. Essentially, the Pyrrhonian believes (non-epistemically) that they are cold, but does not believe (epistemically) that they are in reality cold. It may seem contradictory to say that the Pyrrhonian can, in some sense, both believe and not believe that they are cold, but that is precisely what they do. Sextus says elsewhere that when a skeptic says something with the form of “... is...”, they are to be understood as saying “... appears...”.²⁴ This makes the Pyrrhonian’s original claim that they believe that they appear cold, but they do not believe that they are cold.

To accomplish this split in meaning without contradiction, the Pyrrhonian is utilizing different usages of the verb *is*. There are three main types of *is*: identity, predication, and existential. Identity uses of *is* take the form of *A is A* (He is Dion), predication uses take the form of *A is B* (Dion is tall), and existential uses take the form *A is* (Dion exists).²⁵ Sextus’ example of “I am chilled” uses *is* as a predication and makes no claim about the existential status of either *I* or *chilled*. Sextus resist an existential reading of “I am chilled” and claims that to understand “I am chilled” as an existential claim is to understand it dogmatically. Sextus makes the distinction

²⁴ Frede, M. (1979), “The Sceptic’s Beliefs.” In *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy* edited by Burnyeat, M. & Frede, M. (1997). Hackett. pg. 9.

²⁵ For an exhaustive explanation of ancient Greek usages of the verb ‘is’, see Charles H. Kahn’s *The Verb ‘Be’ In Ancient Greek*.

between existential and predication usages because each usage has different epistemic conditions, some of which the skeptic can accept and some that the skeptic cannot. The predication usage of *is* has little epistemic baggage—the impressions that skeptics receive (like “I am chilled” or “Dion is tall”) come in the form of predication. They report only that something seems some way. The skeptic, via the skeptical persuasion, has good reason not to believe or assent to the existential status of Dion *qua* Dion or tall *qua* tall because the existential usage of *is* reaches past our impressions and makes a claim about what gives rise to the impressions rather than stopping at impressions themselves.

In essence, Sextus’ position seeks to drive a wedge between appearance and reality. It is not Dion’s status as an existing thing that the Pyrrhonian doubts, rather, the Pyrrhonian doubts that Dion truly exists as reported by impression. Dion’s true ontological reality lies behind a veil of impressions and so cannot be directly apprehended. Without direct access to anything beyond impression, any statement or claim about the reality of or matter-of-factness of something is dogmatic—a claim that cannot be defended because no method of inquiry can verify it. The existential use of *is* slips easily past impression and makes claims about the true reality of things—“Dion *is* tall” claims that Dion is veridically tall, with both *Dion* and *tall* being true features of the world. The predication usage of *is* resists the slip into claims about reality itself and merely reports what seems to be the case. The Pyrrhonian uses *is* purely as a report of impression, avoiding any assertions that may be attached to their statement. Sextus describes this strategy as “non-assertion:”

I.193. “...we do not use ‘non-assertion’ to mean that objects are in their nature such as to move us necessarily to non-assertion, but rather to make it clear that now, when we utter it, we feel in this way with regard to these matters under investigation. Remember too that we say we neither posit nor reject anything which is said dogmatically about what is unclear; for we do yield to things which passively move us and lead us necessarily to assent.”

The skeptic remains neutral toward claims that are about how “objects are in their nature.” Instead, the skeptic reports on how they understand the impressions they receive and nothing more. Any epistemic reaching into the nature of things is to dogmatize.

Indeed, epistemic action directed at the source of impression is where the folly of dogmatists occurs—and so to circumvent this folly, the skeptic need only avoid the easy temptation of reaching beyond a predication usage of *is* to an existential usage of *is*. There is no direct epistemic treachery in accepting the appearance that Dion is tall because the appearance stops at the impression and goes no further. By stopping at the impression, the skeptic can assent to impressions non-epistemically, for no further inquiry is required for how something appears—appearances present themselves almost as brute facts: they are as they are. Thus, when speaking about the statement “I am chilled,” Sextus allows for predication uses of *is* to be non-epistemic while existential uses of *is* are epistemic, since they reach beyond impression. The Pyrrhonian, then, can comfortably use *is* as a predication without having to believe or make claims about reality itself.

When the impression of “cold” is experienced by the Pyrrhonian, they assent to, or accept, what the impression appears to report (that they are cold). They withhold the further belief that the world is such a way that it is true that they are cold in the way that it appears—after all, their senses could be deceiving them. Sextus describes the everyday life of the Pyrrhonian as: “attending to what is apparent, [Pyrrhonians] live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions—for we are not able to be utterly inactive.”²⁶ Thus the Pyrrhonian finds themselves avoiding dogma (withholding epistemic beliefs) while retaining the common-sense attitude of everyday life (assenting to non-epistemic impressions).²⁷ Frede, then, understands the Pyrrhonian’s skepticism to be of the urbane variety—the Pyrrhonian assents to ordinary beliefs of everyday life but withholds assent toward scientific and philosophical beliefs.

²⁶ *Ibid.* pg. 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.* pg. xxiii.

Reading Sextus in this light allows Pyrrhonians to easily live in conventional life as laid out by Sextus' Four Fold Prescription. The Prescription allows nature, the necessitation of feelings, laws and customs, and teachings of expertise to guide the skeptic in life. Sextus details it as follows:

- I. 24. Nature's guidance is that by which we are naturally capable of sensation and thought; compulsion of the [emotions and passions] is that by which hunger drives us to food and thirst makes us drink; the handing down of customs and laws is that by which we accept that piety in the conduct of life is good and impiety bad; and instruction in arts and crafts is that by which we are not inactive in whichever we acquire. And we say all these things without belief.²⁸

The Pyrrhonian loses out on no worthwhile aspect of life by expunging belief—they engage in culture, law, religion, art, and professions. They do so, however, only on the basis of appearance and impression, forever guarded against the impulse to reach past our experiences and dogmatize about what is beyond reason's realm. The skeptic lives a common, albeit dogma-free and tranquil, life.

Contrary to Frede's understanding of Sextus as having epistemic and non-epistemic types of belief, Myles Burnyeat does not see Sextus as having the ability to split an impression into dogmatic and non-dogmatic forms of belief. Burnyeat begins his analysis of Pyrrhonian belief by looking at the same passages as Frede—the passage on being heated or cooled quoted above. As per Frede, there are two ways we can understand "I am warmed/chilled." The first way is as a subjective experience. "I am chilled" can simply refer to what the skeptic is feeling at that time. On this understanding, no epistemic content is being imported on the statement "I am chilled" because the skeptic is only reporting their subjective experience and not making a claim about the way the world is outside of that experience. The second way to understand "I am chilled" is in an objective sense. In an objective understanding, "I am chilled" is a proposition that makes a statement about the world—I, as a thing that exists, am physically

²⁸ Dreyfus, G. & Garfield, J. L. (2011). "Madhyamaka and Classical Greek Skepticism." In Dreyfus, G., Finnigan, B., Garfield J. L., Newland, G., Priest, G., Siderits, M., Tanaka, K., Thakchoe, S., Tillemans, T., & Westerhoff, J. C., (eds.), *Moonshadows. Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*. Oxford University Press. pg. 122.

losing heat. Stating the proposition is claiming the proposition to be true of the world. Burnyeat insists here that understanding the statement “I am warmed/chilled” with having these two senses is to anachronistically apply a Cartesian stance onto Sextus.²⁹ If Sextus is read without a Cartesian mindset, then we cannot separate the subjective and objective components of the claim “I am chilled.” Without this split, reading the statement as having a portion that can be assented to non-epistemically and a portion that assent can be epistemically withheld from cannot be maintained. The statement is either objective (dogmatic) or the statement is subjective (non-dogmatic).

It may be possible to avoid this difficulty with the multiple understandings of *is*. The claim can be read as having two interpretations: one based on the *is* of predication and one based on the *is* of existence. Sextus may maintain the split understanding of the claim by endorsing the predication reading and rejecting the existential reading. This strategy, however, does not establish the desired room for the split understanding. Earlier in this paper, the *is* of predication was taken to be non-epistemic, meaning that a statement using predication is not committed to any existential claims about reality. However, both usages of *is*, predication and existential, take “I am chilled” as a proposition that makes a claim about something being true or false. Being true or false is a condition that can only be adjudicated by correspondence to reality itself.³⁰ The appeal to reality itself is the exact enterprise that Sextus labels as dogmatism. Appealing to the usages of *is* does not, then, allow room for understanding the claim “I am chilled” as having two possible readings, be the readings epistemic/non-epistemic or objective/subjective. Thus if we take seriously Sextus’ claim that when a skeptic uses verbs like *is* they are to be understood as meaning *appears*, then no room is made for seeing the skeptic as considering any statement

²⁹ Burnyeat, M. (1980), “Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?” In *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy* edited by Burnyeat, M. & Frede, M. (1997). Hackett. pg. 49.

³⁰ Recall the Stoic concept of a cataleptic impression: “That which comes from something existent and is in accordance with the existent thing itself.” Truth is only guaranteed if the claim matches up with reality. While the ancient Greek schools fielded a wide variety of concepts concerning how reality is and how one can have access to it, the Stoic conception of truth is the primary one discussed here since the Pyrrhonians took the Stoics to be one of their primary philosophical rivals.

objectively. Even on a statement as mundane as “I am chilled,” the skeptic, in avoiding all dogmatic beliefs, takes the impression of “I am chilled” to say nothing of the world itself—they do not believe in any sense that they are truly chilled.

Anything that goes beyond appearances or impressions in an attempt to get at the world itself is subject to further inquiry.³¹ For Sextus, even the lowly belief that “I am chilled” is attempting to get at the world itself and so is dogmatic. In other passages Sextus undermines other seemingly clear examples of the *is/appears* distinction. When discussing the statement “It is day,” Sextus most explicitly brings up the two ways of understanding *is*:

XI. 18. The word ‘is’ has two meanings: (a) ‘is actually’, as we say at the present moment ‘It is day’ in place of ‘It is actually day’, (b) ‘appears’, as some of the mathematicians are accustomed to say often that the distance between two stars ‘is’ a cubit’s length, meaning this as equivalent to ‘It appears so and doubtless is not actually so’; for perhaps it is actually one hundred stades, but appears a cubit because of the height and distance from the eye.³²

Sextus leaves no room for the statement “It is day” to be understood as being non-dogmatic. When a person makes the claim, they are really saying that they actually claim that it is day (objectively). But the skeptic always takes their own usage of *is* to mean *appears*, as in the second sense that Sextus explains. Thus it is not the case that the skeptic can assent non-dogmatically to the impression “It is day” while withholding assent to it being true that “It is day.” Rather, the skeptic wholesale withholds assent to “It is day,” for that claim does not differentiate between types of belief—either one believes it or not.³³ The Pyrrhonian, in order to avoid dogmatism, simply does not believe it. Burnyeat, then, understands the Pyrrhonian’s skepticism to be of the rustic variety—the Pyrrhonian hotly rejects all belief, however mundane.³⁴

We have, now, explored in more detail the two competing interpretations of Sextus. The first is urbane Pyrrhonism, endorsed by Frede, who takes Sextus as having two kinds of belief,

³¹ *Ibid.*, pg 51.

³² *Ibid.* pg. 50. This quotation is taken from Sextus’ *Against the Mathematicians*. While this direct quote is not in *PH*, at I.135, 198, and 200 Sextus clearly defends the implications of this quote.

³³ *Ibid.* pg. 52.

³⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 62.

one dogmatic, the other non-dogmatic. On this reading, the Pyrrhonian does have beliefs—but the beliefs are of the appropriate, non-dogmatic kind. The second is rustic Pyrrhonism, endorsed by Burnyeat, who understands Sextus as having only one kind of belief, and that belief cannot be separated from claims about the objectivity of the world. Thus, on this view, all beliefs are dogmatic. The Pyrrhonian, then, does not assent to any beliefs whatsoever.

It seems that our task now would be to prod our intuitions and defend one interpretation over the other. One may be persuaded by Frede's position—that it would be absurd and practically impossible for a Pyrrhonian to withhold assent on all beliefs. Indeed, Sextus' own discussion of how a Pyrrhonian responds to the statement "I am chilled" seems to explicitly endorse the urbane interpretation. However, the rustic interpretation is not without solid merits. Burnyeat's charge of anachronism and Sextus' further claims about the distinctions and usages of *is/appears* seem to strongly support reading Sextus as taking all statements, ordinary or scientific, as dogmatic assertions about reality. How, then, are we to adjudicate the dispute between urbane and rustic understandings of Pyrrhonism? A solution may appear within the work of Jonathan Barnes.

1.5 Barnes' *Universal Cure*

Barnes hints that the task of determining whether or not Pyrrhonism is urbane or rustic may be misconceived. Indeed, Barnes goes as far as to claim that determining this debate rests on a silly presupposition.³⁵ Barnes' reasoning for dismissing the goal of adjudicating between urbane and rustic Pyrrhonism is because of Sextus' insistence on, and skepticism's ultimate outcome of, tranquility. In Sextus' eyes, skepticism is medicine for the epistemically-afflicted mind. Sextus describes the plight of those who dogmatize in *PH*:

- I. 27. For those who hold the opinion that things are good or bad by nature are perpetually troubled. When they lack what they believe to be good, they take themselves to be persecuted by natural evils and they pursue what (so they think) is good. And when they have acquired these things, they experience more troubles; for they are elated beyond reason and

³⁵ Barnes, J. (1982). pg. 91.

measure, and in fear of change they do anything so as not to lose what they believe to be good.

Adrift in the sea of *taraxia*, the afflicted mind finds no peace or happiness—grabbing endlessly at phantom truths. The skeptic, in their search for truth, begins by utilizing the modes and the skeptical persuasion to scrub false beliefs from their life. They undertake the rigorous and challenging epistemic position of belief suspension. In this sincere search for truth the skeptic discovers that nothing can be legitimately assented to as true, so they withhold all assent. In suspension of judgement they find themselves availed of disturbances for they have disallowed the possibility of believing falsely. Only at this juncture in their skeptical pursuit do they fortuitously achieve tranquility. They find that Sextus' claim that "those who make no determination about what is good and bad by nature neither avoid nor pursue anything with intensity; and hence they are tranquil,"³⁶ is true. While their search for truth has perhaps come up short, the skeptic has gained something that is possibly more valuable to the human condition—peace.

Pyrrhonism is a doctor that cures *taraxia*. Like a doctor, Pyrrhonism only applies as much medicine to the patient as is required. When speaking of skepticism's effect on different individuals, Sextus notes a similar effect that medicine has on people, saying that "sometimes patients undergoing surgery or something of the kind bear it, while the onlookers faint because of their opinion that what is happening is bad."³⁷ Some patients require invasive medical intervention to be cured, while others may only require minor remedies to be set right. Some patients will be able to tolerate massive amounts of medical work, while others may turn white at the thought of medical application. So too are the patients of skepticism—some minds require extensive mental work to cure themselves of false belief, others may only need the occasional checkup. So too do the patients of skepticism have varying tolerances for medicine—some may be able to wade through the Modes without a second thought, while others may only draw

³⁶ *PH* I. 28.

³⁷ *PH* III. 236.

mental blanks when evaluating even a mundane belief. The medicine of skepticism is the suspension of judgement and each patient requires different amounts of medicine. To reach tranquility, the appropriate amount of medicine must be applied in each case.³⁸ The Pyrrhonian may endorse urbane skepticism when only a light dose of suspension of judgement is required for tranquility. In other cases, rustic skepticism must be administered to avail *taraxia*. Understanding Pyrrhonism as the path to tranquility, then, frees it from being restricted solely to urbane or rustic interpretations. It can be both urbane and rustic—its form depends on the particular patient's needs.

Barnes' suggestion, leaning heavily on Sextus' analogy of skepticism as medicine for the mind, that Pyrrhonism be understood as capable of utilizing urbane and rustic interpretations may be an initially satisfactory way to put to bed the dispute between Frede and Burnyeat. Pyrrhonism is now context dependent—Frede's distinction between dogmatic and non-dogmatic beliefs is retained in contexts where that is what achieves *ataraxia* and Burnyeat's claim that the beliefs cannot be split into epistemic/non-epistemic categories is retained in contexts where that is what achieves *ataraxia*. Barnes claims that the question of whether or not a Pyrrhonian has beliefs is misconceived because "Pyrrhonism may be rustic or urbane. Everything depends on the state of the particular patient."³⁹ By acting as a doctor of the mind, Sextus may get to have his cake and eat it too.

This solution, however, may be selling Pyrrhonism short. It does not fully capture the inherent complexity and nuance of Sextus' original position. Seeing Pyrrhonism as merely medicine for the mind seems to dismiss too quickly the detail and seriousness with which Sextus approaches skepticism. Throughout *PH*, Sextus takes great care to philosophically motivate skepticism as a rational and coherent system of epistemological pursuit that just so happens to also produce tranquility. The skeptic does not begin down the path of Pyrrhonism

³⁸ Barnes, J. (1982). pg. 90.

³⁹ *Ibid.* pg. 91.

with the express goal of achieving *ataraxia*—the skeptic endeavors to adhere to Pyrrhonism in order to find truth. Indeed, Sextus describes the skeptic's achieved tranquility as accidental: "But when [the skeptic] suspended judgement, tranquility followed as it were fortuitously, as a shadow follows the body."⁴⁰ Healing the sick is a serendipitous consequence of the skeptical persuasion, not the primary goal. Doctors set out into their pursuits with the express goal of producing cures. Hardly a soul would go to a doctor who accidentally produces cures in the process of their work. If Pyrrhonism is expressly a doctor, it is surely a mad one; seeking to fully understand truth, only to accidentally rid the mind of troubles. Any tranquility-seeking pilgrim would be foolish to begin with the Pyrrhonians. The skeptics would prattle on about modes and persuasions, only figuring tranquility into the equation once it is abruptly rammed into, like a corner in the dark. To see the Pyrrhonian's position on truth, belief, and assent from any bedrock position other than epistemology is to mischaracterize Pyrrhonism.

It would still be unfair, however, to entirely dismiss the role that tranquility plays in skepticism. Sextus' own description of skepticism is:

- I. 8. ...an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts we come first to suspension of judgement and afterwards to tranquility.

The epistemic capacity to find equipollent arguments is the root of skepticism, closely followed by suspension of judgement. Tranquility accompanies suspension of judgement as a fellow traveler, a happy addition to the journey itself. Even when Sextus does treat tranquility as the causal outcome of skepticism, it seems as if Pyrrhonism pulls a bit of a bait-and-switch on those who come expressly seeking tranquility. Sextus describes those who are in search of tranquility as:

- I.12. Men of talent, troubled by the anomaly in things and puzzled as to which of them they should rather assent to, came to investigate what in things is true and what false, thinking that by deciding these issues they would become tranquil.

⁴⁰ PHI. 29.

These “men of talent” are troubled because they are assenting to falsehoods. They wish to know what things are true so they may correctly assent to them. It is truth they seek in the hope that it will sort out their troubled lives. Sextus continues, describing the unexpected solution the troubled men find:

- I. 12. The chief constitutive principle of skepticism is the claim that to every account and equal account is opposed; for it is from this, we think, that we come to hold no beliefs.

Once no beliefs are held, the troubled men “neither reject nor posit anything,” effectively achieving the suspension of judgement and, serendipitously, tranquility.⁴¹ The men originally came to skepticism to find truth, so that they could better align themselves with the true way of the world. Instead, they have discovered that assuming truth was theirs to find was their original mistake. They have arrived at tranquility, but not from the path they initially intended.

Ultimately, the position of Pyrrhonism as expressly a cure for the mind is a shaky one to maintain. Tranquility is the outcome of skepticism and Sextus leans on skepticism’s ability to achieve tranquility as a strong motivational aspect of the practice. But the meat and potatoes of Pyrrhonism is not tranquility—it is the Modes, the skeptical persuasion, equipollence, and suspension of judgement. Skepticism is built from epistemic principles and draws its roots from the discussion of truth and reality. Tranquility is the happy-accident-turned-beautiful-river in the Bob Ross original of skepticism; it was not the goal of the painting, but it made the painting that much more beautiful.

1.6 An Alternative Cure

Within Sextus’ work, at the heart of the dispute between urbane and rustic skepticism, at the corners of the mad doctor’s motivations, lies a potential new way of organizing and understanding Pyrrhonism: that of paradox. Seeing Pyrrhonism as truly paradoxical may allow Pyrrhonism to retain its epistemic roots as both urbane and rustic without tension. While paradox initially hints toward contradiction, the structure of Pyrrhonism may allow for its

⁴¹ PHI. 10.

paradoxical merits to take *both* urbane and rustic Pyrrhonism to be correct and consistent without appealing heavily to the practical medical interpretations of Barnes. Sextus' search for truth steps him toward the limits of iteration, expression, and thought. He is pressed up against the edge of human mental ability, and in his attempt to describe what lies beyond our abilities he cannot but work with what abilities we do possess. Sextus finds himself straddling that which can be expressed and that which cannot, and so he attempts to describe a position that cannot be described—a task that cannot be done without paradox. But since Sextus has arrived at his position with merit and rigor, he cannot be shrugged off as simply contradictory—it may simply be veridical to claim that Pyrrhonism is paradoxically urbane and rustic. By virtue of how Pyrrhonism is built makes it paradoxical, rather than a set of practical or pragmatic considerations. The paradox lying at the heart of Pyrrhonism can be understood as an Inclosure Schema. Graham Priest has suggested that the Inclosure Schema can be applied to the discussion of Pyrrhonism. In the next chapter, Priest's work on the paradox will be explored, explained, and applied to discussion of Pyrrhonian skepticism.

CHAPTER 2

2.1 Paradox

Paradoxes are fertile ground for contradiction and incoherence. As thinkers push toward the limits of thought and expression, they confront paradoxes that challenge their reason. As for the Western philosophical tradition, it has a long and uneasy relationship with paradox. Aristotle struggled with paradoxes surrounding prime matter, religious philosophers like Anselm met paradoxes when attempting to conceptualize and defend God, and such later philosophers as Immanuel Kant ran into paradox when investigating reality. The rules of logic and reasoning classify contradiction as absurd—a position that likely motivated later western philosophers to avoid paradox. Classical logic works from a framework that assumes existence functions on a two-valence system—things are either true or false. Classically, contradictions simply cannot be the state of affairs; I cannot be in two places at once, red cannot be blue, something real cannot be fake, and true things cannot be false.

Perhaps the reason why paradoxes were met with disdain in the western tradition was because of how they were understood to work and what their consequences were perceived to be. In order to get a better feel for western thinkers' motivations for avoiding paradoxes, a definition of paradox will be sketched and an example will be provided. This definition, while by no means perfect, will capture the spirit of paradoxes and be this paper's standard for identifying paradoxes in thought and theory. Despite the limitation and vulnerability of the definition and various examples provided here, they will be useful tools for this paper's ultimate venture into the quagmire of paradox. The examples will begin with the colloquial Simpson's Paradox and move to the famous Liar Paradox. Ultimately, this brief discussion will help to familiarize ourselves with paradoxes and grapple with some of the mechanisms that give rise to them.

Paradoxes are counterintuitive conclusions produced by reliable reasoning. Indeed, the Greek origins of the word make this explicit: *para-* can be translated as 'distinct from' or

'contrary to' and *doxa* can be translated as 'opinion', making paradox translate as 'distinct from (contrary to) opinion'. Puzzling results that seem to go against our basic logical intuitions are paradoxical. The ancient Greeks explored paradoxes with gumption—thinkers like Zeno of Elea, Heraclitus, and Eubulides, the attributed original author of the famous Liar Paradox, all sought to construct and utilize paradoxes in their philosophical projects. While the origin of the West's relationship lies with the ancients, a modern example will serve as a basic introduction to paradox. We begin with Simpson's Paradox.

Simpson's Paradox occurs in statistics and arises when groups of data independently show one trend, but once combined show the opposite trend.⁴² Intuitively, if two sets of data both show one trend, then expectation dictates that once combined, the trend would stay the same. After all, two upward trends do not make one downward trend. In some scenarios, however, this is indeed the case. To illustrate, consider an example from Ken Ross that involves batting averages.⁴³ Two players post batting averages over consecutive years where at the end of each season, one batter's average is higher than the other's. Intuition would dictate that if the averages are combined, the player with the higher annual average would still have a higher cumulative batting average than the player with the lower annual batting average. Take the real life players Derek Jeter and David Justice and their averages from 1995 to 1997:

	1995		1996		1997	
Derek Jeter	12/48	.250	183/582	.314	190/654	.291
David Justice	104/411	.253	45/140	.321	163/495	.329

The fraction indicates how many hits/at-bats each player had and the decimal indicates the batting average. For each season from 1995 to 1997, David Justice consistently posted a better batting average than Derek Jeter. Reason would dictate that if combined, Justice would maintain his position as the stronger batter since he posted a better average each year. Paradoxically, however, this is not the case:

⁴² I. J. Good, Y. Mittal (1987). "The Amalgamation and Geometry of Two-by-Two Contingency Tables." *The Annals of Statistics*. 15 (2): 694-711.

⁴³ Ross, K. (2004), "A Mathematician at the Ballpark: Odds and Probabilities for Baseball Fans." Pi Press.

	Combined	
Derek Jeter	385/1284	.300
David Justice	312/1046	.298

Once the statistics are combined, Derek Jeter is revealed to have the better average over the same three-year period than David Justice. Thus, we reach the paradoxical conclusion that the underperforming annual batter is in fact the better overall batter.

Simpson's Paradoxes, while puzzling at first glance, can be resolved by accounting for discrepancies in frequency.⁴⁴ Look again at the yearly numbers of Jeter and Justice; Jeter's stronger years account for the majority of his at-bats, while Justice's poorest year accounts for almost half of his at-bats. The impact of Justice's better batting years on his combined average is low because the frequency of batting during those years is also low. The high frequency of weaker overall years weighs more heavily into his combined average. The opposite is true for Jeter; his worst year is his lowest frequency year, while his stronger years have a much higher frequency of at-bats. When taken independently, the averages portray a slightly misleading story about Justice being a stronger batter than Jeter. When combined, the averages more accurately reflect the amount played by each player, and so properly show Jeter to be the stronger batter.

The counterintuitive nature of Simpson's Paradox, while being a good first example of paradox, is relatively easy to explain away as simply being a quirk in statistical reasoning. A stronger, more philosophical example of paradox can illustrate how, despite reason's best efforts, some counterintuitive conclusions are not easily explained away. To begin a more in-depth discussion on paradox, we turn first to the Liar Paradox and some of its possible solutions.

The Liar Paradox is a well-known scheme that runs as follows:

This sentence is false.

⁴⁴ Knock, N., & Gaskins, L. (2016). "Simpson's paradox, moderation and the emergence of quadratic relationships in path models: An information systems illustrates." *International Journal of Applied Nonlinear Science*, (2)3, 200-234.

To better illustrate why this is paradoxical, some shorthand will be utilized to maintain clarity. The above sentence in its entirety will be referred to as 'LS', short for 'liar sentence.' If we claim that what LS says is true, meaning that the sentence's own claim that it is false holds, then LS itself is false. But if we believe this claim that LS is false, it means that the sentence's original claim that it is false does not hold, making LS itself true. Thus, "This sentence is false" is false only if "This sentence is false" is true.⁴⁵ LS results in a contradiction by being both true and false—being true makes it false and being false makes it true.

In classical logic, deriving contradiction leads to absurdity. This is known as the Rule of Explosivity—if absurdity can be shown in a proof, then one can conclude whatever one likes. It is logically valid to claim absolutely anything once one has reached absurdity. For example, if it is true that I am immortal and that I will die tomorrow, I can conclude that I am a unicorn. Since being immortal and dying tomorrow are contradictory, the rules of logic break down and I can conclude anything, including that I am a unicorn. While the truth of my being a unicorn can be disputed, the logical structure of my claim is valid—that from a contradiction, anything can be concluded. The Liar Paradox is a contradiction because both "LS is true" and "LS is false" are logical outcomes of LS. From the contradiction absurdity follows.

There are multiple strategies to resolving the Liar Paradox and they are as impressively sophisticated as they are varied. One of the main approaches to resolving the Liar Paradox is known as paraconsistent logic. Paraconsistent logic is non-classical, meaning that it denies or modifies at least one of classical logic's primary rules. Paraconsistent solutions reject the classical Rule of Explosivity. By denying that contradictions lead to absurdity, one can consequently allow for veridical contradictions—contradictions that do not break down into absurdity. Rejecting Explosivity allows the Liar Paradox to be correctly both true and false. In a

⁴⁵ Beall, Jc, Glanzberg, M & R, D, "Liar Paradox", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/liar-paradox/>>.

sense, if we were to assign a truth value to the paradoxical sentence in its entirety, that value would simply be true—it is in fact correctly the case that the sentence is both true and false.

Unsurprisingly, the paraconsistent method is a counterintuitive solution of allowing true contradictions to solve paradoxical problems. It is no easy epistemic task to overcome the natural intuitions of reason and accept true contradictions, even on the basis of strong logical reasoning. Yet, breaking from classical logic allows us to view problems in new light. If paradoxes don't always devolve into absurdity, paradoxes and contradictions become legitimate features of our reasoning rather than puzzles meant to be explained away or avoided.

To the end of shedding new light onto logical issues, this paper will be adopting an approach that follows decidedly in the spirit of paraconsistent logic.⁴⁶ The primary paradoxes dealt with here arise at some limit of human reason—and one finds paradox most commonly at the edges of human thought and ability. When attempting to pursue reason beyond its own limits, one is bound to encounter paradox. Indeed, paradox seems unavoidable when the known attempts to push into the unknown. If paradoxes can be understood and corralled by the mind instead of ignored or explained away, then perhaps the borders of reason will themselves be better known and pushed outward. Viewing paradoxes from a new lens, one that allows them not only to avoid absurdity but also to be true, is the first step in moving toward a better understanding of the limits of reason. Paraconsistent approaches to logic provide the clearest view on how to best utilize paradoxes by redefining how they can function, allowing for the possibility of paradoxes as a bridge between the known and unknown. Thus, for the purposes of this paper's project of soberly confronting paradox and the limits of reason, paraconsistent approaches to logic will be the primary mode of interpretation.

⁴⁶ Another common strategy is paracomplete logic. Paracomplete approaches deny the Law of the Excluded Middle (LEM), which states that all propositions are either true or false. By denying LEM, paracomplete solutions are able to place LS into a third category of truth values that lies between true and false—being indeterminate. An indeterminate proposition does not have a truth value; it is neither true nor false. This resolves the Liar Paradox by avoiding entering into the contradictory truth assignments of LS that make it false if LS is true and true if LS is false. We can simply say that LS is indeterminate and avoid the paradox altogether. While this strategy avoids paradox, this paper's intent is to explore and utilize paradoxes, making paracompleteness an unattractive method for exploring paradox.

With this strategy in hand, we will now revisit some of the Western philosophical tradition's past encounters with paradox. Brief reviews of portions of Aristotle, Anselm, and Kant's philosophies will be covered and shown to be paradoxical in nature. While the original thinkers may not have recognized, acknowledged, or accepted the paradoxes within their reasoning, it is this paper's position that a paraconsistent interpretation of these works can be a valuable avenue towards understanding them. This historical survey reflects only a small part of the literature surrounding these topics and is by no means presenting robust new interpretations of these issues. These examples serve to highlight the rocky relationship of some of the West's encounters with paradox and how some tension may be avoidable by accepting contradictions at the limits. Essentially, by viewing uncomfortable paradoxes in comfortable surroundings, we will establish a warmer relationship with paradox. The primary modern defender of paraconsistent logic, Graham Priest, will be our guide through this historical interlude. We begin with Aristotle and Prime Matter.

Aristotle asks the question of "What is being?" in his *Metaphysics*. Being is, in Aristotle's view, the same as substance, and in turn, substance is best defined as essence. "Essence" in the original Greek translates to the phrase "the what it was to be."⁴⁷ Essence can be understood as the definition of something; if it fits the definition, then that is what it is. Something is primary if it is one and the same as its essence.⁴⁸ Existence itself, however, is not combined with other characteristics (like "brown," "tall," or "smart") because for it to be existence itself, it must be unadulterated. Prime Matter, then, is the ultimate "what is" of existence. Aristotle further

⁴⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, Aristotle translations taken from: Ross, W. D. (1925). *Aristotle's Metaphysics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁴⁸ Shields, C. "Aristotle", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/aristotle/>>. Aristotle's further theory of hylomorphism determines this outcome. Hylomorphism states that a thing is the combination of form and matter. Dogs have the essence of 'dog' and dog-shaped matter, the combination of which makes a dog. If the dog lacks either the form or matter of what it is to be a dog, then it fails to be a dog.

explains in *Metaphysics* that “the essence of a thing is what it is said to be in respect of itself.”⁴⁹

Prime Matter is purely existence itself—being *qua* being, the very definition of existence.

The task is now to discern what the definition of existence actually is.⁵⁰ This is where we run into issues with prime matter. Aristotle explains in *Metaphysics* that Prime Matter is “itself neither a particular thing nor of a particular quantity nor otherwise positively characterized; nor yet negatively, for negations also will belong to it only by accident.”⁵¹ This description places Prime Matter at the lowest level of substance since it is not made or constituted of anything but itself. Since it is not made of anything else it does not have matter in the way that such substances as tables have matter. Without matter, under Aristotelianhylomorphism, it cannot have form. Prime Matter, then, is the ultimate subject and has no essence.⁵² Prime Matter can be anything, but it itself is nothing. But Prime Matter has no essence and so is inherently unknowable. Yet we can describe what Prime Matter is and in so doing give its essence. Thus, we end up with an antimony regarding Prime Matter: we cannot know what it is since it has no essence, but its essence is that which is “what is.” Paradoxically, Prime Matter’s essence is essencelessness.⁵³

While Aristotle never explicitly endorsed this specific paradoxical understanding of Prime Matter (there is debate surrounding the claim that Prime Matter has no essence⁵⁴), it is clear

⁴⁹ 1029b14.

⁵⁰ Within Aristotle’s scholarship there is issue with Aristotle’s position on universals. Aristotle understands that only universals are definable because universals contain no smaller, definable parts (*Metaphysics* 1036a29). For prime matter, that means that being itself is a definable universal (*Metaphysics* 1034a6-8). We now have two propositions that Aristotle is committed to when it comes to prime matter: (1) Prime matter’s essence is existence itself and (2) existence itself is universal. In *Metaphysics VII*, Aristotle extensively argues that universals are not essences (Shields, C. (2016)). This adds a third premise to his theory: (3) no universals are essences. This additional states that prime matter’s essence *must* be a universal because it is definable but also universals *cannot* be essences. Aristotle’s theory comes here to an inconsistency in relation to universals. However, this is not specifically an issue with how to conceptualize prime matter itself. For this reason, this discussion on universals, while central to Aristotle scholarship in general and worthy of note, is not of primary concern to the paradoxical understanding of prime matter’s ontological state.

⁵¹ 1029a24-25. This translation taken from Barnes (1984).

⁵² Priest, G. (2002). *Beyond the Limits of Thought*. Cambridge University Press. pg 18-19.

⁵³ *Ibid.* pg. 20.

⁵⁴ In *Metaphysics* 7.3 (Barnes, J. 1984), Aristotle gives a thought experiment to illustrate this concept of prime matter, Priest argues that the thought experiment begs the question and so fails to establish the claim that prime matter has no essence. This failure does not change the definition of prime matter as being essenceless; rather it reveals that Aristotle’s commitments to demonstrate prime matter’s actual existence fails.

from Aristotle's work that if Prime Matter functions in the way that he describes in *Metaphysics*, then it is paradoxical. Using a paraconsistent approach would allow us to make logical space for this conception of Prime Matter. Aristotle is attempting to describe the ineffable—something that cannot be done without stumbling into paradoxical language or concepts. Expecting an endeavor like the description of Prime Matter to fit nicely into our ordinary systems of logic is rather obtuse. Of course, a conception of Prime Matter seems contradictory. Aristotle steps to the very limit of ontology; he is bound to offend our common sense in some manner. Paraconsistent thinking, however, does not shy away from the contradictory nature of essenceless essences and so can seriously grapple with the puzzles that accompany an attempt to transcend the limits of our metaphysical pursuits. A classical glance at Aristotle's conception of Prime Matter leads us to absurdity, but a paraconsistent viewpoint allows us seriously consider what the metaphysics of existence itself actually entails. A serious look into the bizarre outer reaches of the status and nature of existence is far more philosophically valuable than brushing aside a theory at the first hint of classical inconsistency.

Next, we will consider Saint Anselm. Anselm is best known for his ontological argument for the existence of God. The argument runs as follows: God is the greatest conceivable being. If God did not exist, then an existing being like God could be conceived. This being would be greater than God because it exists and God does not. This, however, is a contradiction because God is the greatest conceivable being and nothing greater can be thought. So, God must exist to be the greatest conceivable being. Therefore, God exists. In terms closer to Anselm's own, with 'God' switched out for (albeit cumbersome) 'that than which a greater cannot be thought', the argument can be formulated:

- (1) That than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought.
- (2) If that than which a greater cannot be thought can be thought, it exists in reality.

Therefore,

- (3) That than which a greater cannot be thought exists in reality.

Anselm defends this reasoning in premise (1) by discussing the mind's ability to easily think of greater versions of lesser things. He rhetorically remarks on this ability in a reply to his contemporary critic Gaunilo, questioning "Who, for example, is unable to think... that if something that has a beginning and end is good, then something that has a beginning but never ceases to exist is much better?"⁵⁵ If one continues to think of ways in which something can be greater, eventually one will have a conception of something so great that nothing greater can be thought. Anselm considers existence to be greater than non-existence and so once the idea of the greatest conceivable thing is reached, it must necessarily exist, making premise (2) of the above argument true. So, if 'that than which a greater cannot be thought' is possible, then it exists.⁵⁶

While Anselm's argument has its own issues stemming from its Neo-Platonist roots, it leads Anselm into paradox. When he claims in *Proslogion*, Chapter 15, that God is "something greater than can be thought," Anselm places God outside of all the things that can be thought. Yet Anselm does conceive of God when he describes him as being the greatest conceivable being.⁵⁷ Thus, God is paradoxically both beyond conception and the greatest conceivable being.

The valuable philosophical merit of Anselm's work is not from his attempt to prove God but rather from his claims about the ability to conceptualize. We can establish a cognitive task like "imagining something to be better than it is now" as a completely reasonable ability of ours. Yet if we follow this reasonable ability to its limit and imagine the best possible thing, we outstrip the ability and consequently render it ineffective, making it so we can no longer imagine anything better. This self-undermining outcome of a conceptual ability does not reduce the ability itself to absurdity; rather it shows that there is a paradoxical implication that arises at the limits of our cognitive abilities. A paraconsistent approach regarding the ability of conception

⁵⁵ Anselm translations taken from: Davies, B, and G. R. Evans (ed.), 1998. *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁵⁶ Visser, S, and T. Williams, 2009. *Anselm (Great Medieval Thinkers)*, New York: Oxford University Press.

⁵⁷ Priest, G. (1995). pg. 58.

allows us to factor in this self-undermining oddity rather than dismiss it as a flaw in thinking. From a paraconsistent viewpoint, then, Anslem has highlighted something very valuable not about God, but about the human capacity of conceptualization.

Finally, we turn to Kant. Key aspects of Kant's philosophy are *phenomena* and *noumena*. *Phenomena* defines things perceivable by the senses, while *noumena* is essentially defined as things that are not *phenomena*.⁵⁸ *Phenomena* are the perceptions that take place within space and time, but for Kant, what the perceptions are of, or what actual object our perceptions represent, are not things that we directly perceive. The object itself lies outside of our perception and so is *noumena*. Thus "objects," as understood by a layman, have two aspects—a perceived phenomenal aspect and an unperceivable noumenal aspect. A cup of coffee is a representation of an object in space and time (*phenomena*), but the object itself that our perceptions purport to represent is not itself perceptible or within space and time (*noumena*).

When Kant states that *noumena* are defined as unperceivable and outside of space and time, he is setting *noumena* outside of possible knowledge. Without any conscious access to *noumena*, we are unable to know the first thing about them. Upon further inspection, however, Kant's claim is stronger than us being unable to epistemically access noumena—the additional aspect of noumena being outside of space and time places *noumena* beyond the framework of conception itself. Perception, knowledge, and conception take place in space and time. Anything that lies outside of this framework is literally imperceptible, inconceivable, and unconceptualizable.⁵⁹ No meaningful statements can be made about noumena because nothing within space, time, and perception can be applied to things that lie outside of space, time, and perception.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* pg. 74.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* pg. 81.

Here enters a paradox for Kant. Noumena are beyond conception because no thoughts can be made about them. At the same time, however, to describe and discuss noumena, as Kant often does, is to form thoughts about them. Thus, because of the kinds of objects that Kant's theory has produced, he is committed to thinking about objects that cannot be thought about.⁶⁰

Kant's noumena echo the conceptual limits that Anselm's proof encounters. We can imagine a class of things that are themselves defined as unimaginable. While classically this contradictory position would dissolve into absurdity, a paraconsistent position understands noumena to veridically function paradoxically. Theorizing about the unknown allows us to make claims about unconceptualized things despite not knowing what those things actually are. By doing this, we have paradoxically thought about the unthought. This does not reduce our claims about the unknown to absurdity. Rather, we highlight the edges and limits of our conceptual sphere, granting us the valuable philosophical possibility of exploring the unknown and our limits further.

We have seen after these (criminally) brief looks into Western philosophy that not only is paradox more common than usually thought, paradoxes arise as consequences of legitimate theories and reason, not by way of faulty logic. The common thread in each of these paradoxes is that they arise at a limit of human thought. To describe the indescribable, to think about the unthinkable, and to express the inexpressible is to necessarily involve oneself in paradox. It may be an unconscious arrogance that we could force the categorically unknown into the known by deploying our common categorically known concepts of consistency and truth. Kant may have been the first to explicitly detail the true edge of thought, but he is not the only one who ran into it. Like the division between phenomena and noumena, at the borders of reason lies a veil of comprehensibility—on one side is the realm of human knowledge and experience, on the other

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* pg. 82.

is the realm outside of or beyond human thought. The border may shift and move as humans continue to learn and study, but we remain simply unequipped to grasp or understand what lies beyond our limit. To peer into the veil from one side and claim that what resides on the other fits into the framework of one's own side is sheer hubris. One cannot penetrate higher dimensions, one cannot imagine round squares, and one cannot comprehend the incomprehensible.

We must, then, jettison the West's impulse to resolve the paradoxes that lie at the borders of reason. When the veil is met, we must not pretend to explain it away. The attempted resolutions of limit paradoxes leave a bad taste in one's mouth and ultimately leave an unsatisfying solution to an incredibly worthwhile problem. Instead, paradoxes at the edge of human ability must be acknowledged and worked with. Admitting that our concepts can go no further is not an admittance of failure but rather a remarkable observation and insight into human knowledge and thought. By soberly grappling with the limits of our abilities, we may better understand our abilities themselves. We shall now turn away from the strategy of either ignoring or explaining away paradox utilized by Aristotle, Anselm, and Kant. There is another tradition that more comfortably worked with and within paradox—Buddhism.⁶¹

2.2 Buddhism

Buddhism is a massive tradition whose ancient roots stretch far deeper than the scope of this paper could hope to capture. A brief roadmap of the beginnings of the tradition will be sketched so that we may zero in on the skeptical schools of Buddhism and their paradoxical views of life. To this end we begin with the Second Buddhist Council in the 4th century BCE. Not long after Siddhārtha Gautama's enlightenment, the primary division in Buddhism occurred between Theravāda and Mahāyāna. Theravāda schools focused on the enlightenment of a person as an individual pursuit. It is a person's own goal to become an *Arahants*, someone who

⁶¹ It must be noted that toleration of contradiction is not a feature of Indian logic. The moniker "classical logic" applies as much to ancient western philosophy as ancient eastern philosophy. Both ancient traditions developed and endorsed basic logical rules like non-contradiction and explosivity. The paraconsistent interpretations endorsed in this paper remain a matter of debate.

has achieved nirvana—once a person becomes an *Arahants*, they have essentially reached the end goal of Theravāda Buddhism. Mahāyāna schools also seek nirvana, but hold that true nirvana cannot be had until the suffering of *all* beings is extinguished. The goal of Mahāyāna adherents, then, is not to become personally enlightened as an *Arahants*, but to become a *Bodhisattva*, someone who is able to reach nirvana but chooses to stay in the cycle of rebirth to eliminate the suffering of others.

The *Bodhisattva* path takes seriously the Four Noble Truths and Three Marks. The Four Noble Truths are the key tenets of Buddhism and state that suffering exists, suffering has its causes, suffering can be ended, and suffering's end. The Three Marks are impermanence, non-self, and suffering. The Marks together paint a picture of reality that is ontologically non-persisting, contains no identity or essence, and is rife with attachment, craving, and grasping. Combining the Four Noble Truths and the Three Marks reveals that people suffer by being attached to something that cannot be identified and does not persist over time. Seeing the fleeting phenomena (*dharma*) of existence as more real than they are is the root of our worldly suffering.

Mahāyāna and the path of the *Bodhisattva* understand that suffering exists but also that there are no souls that the suffering belongs to. Without individual souls taking possession of specific sufferings, sufferings cannot be sectioned off to individuals. Instead, suffering belongs to the whole of experience. This means that any amount of suffering that exists at all is suffering that exists for everything. Buddhism holds nirvana as the cessation of all suffering, and Mahāyāna schools believe that the status of “no suffering at all” can only be achieved if there is literally no suffering whatsoever—either everything is free of suffering or nothing is free of suffering. Until all suffering is extinguished, no one can truly reach nirvana. Thus, the major split in Buddhism is between a personal path to enlightenment as an *Arahants* following Theravāda and a universal path to enlightenment as a *Bodhisattva* following Mahāyāna.

The claims that the Three Marks establish are by no means light on philosophical baggage. Stating that one believes everything is impermanent and that there is no self prompts a lot of raised eyebrows in response. Of course, the Three Marks are not without defense. From critical explorations of the Three Marks, Buddhism develops its skeptical stripes. Indeed, intense analytical critiques of substantial claims prompt one to inspect concepts of truth and validity with great scrutiny. Once truth itself is under the microscope, skeptical conclusions are bound to follow. Since the Mahāyāna school takes more seriously the Three Marks, it is from this interpretation of Buddhism that the skeptical school of Madhyamaka takes shape.

To this end, we turn to the 2nd century BCE Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna. Nāgārjuna is the founding mind behind Madhyamaka thinking itself and is even today held as the pinnacle of philosophical sophistication by Tibetan Buddhism.⁶² Nāgārjuna, in his works *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (MMK), translated as *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*,⁶³ and *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (VV), translated as *Overturing the Objections*,⁶⁴ sets out the major philosophical project surrounding Buddhist skepticism and emptiness. Where Sextus Empiricus chronicles the Pyrrhonian's path through the skeptical project, Nāgārjuna will guide us through this portion of Indian skepticism. We shall begin our journey into eastern skepticism with Nāgārjuna's work from the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*.

Similar to the Pyrrhonians, Nāgārjuna is concerned with whether or not we can truly know something. Where the Pyrrhonians developed the Five and Ten Modes of Skepticism, Nāgārjuna developed the *pañcakoṭi* (five-cornered negation). Nāgārjuna gives the five corners in VV verses 31-51 in response to his contemporary rivals—the Hindu Nyāya school of thought—who defended a form of realism. The Nyāya are to Nāgārjuna as the dogmatists are to Sextus; the former purports to truly know things about reality and the way that things are, while

⁶² Westerhoff, J. C., "Nāgārjuna", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/nagarjuna/>>.

⁶³ *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* translations taken from Garfield, (2002).

⁶⁴ Mills, E., Nāgārjuna's *pañcakoṭi*, Agrippa's Trilemma and the Uses of Skepticism. *Comparative Philosophy* Volume 7, No. 2 (2016): 44-66.

the latter critiques those claims and shows that they do not satisfy their own standards. The Nyāya and the dogmatists are of the same philosophical spirit, while Nāgārjuna and Sextus share the opposing spirit. In the *pañcakoṭī*, Nāgārjuna considers the objects of knowledge (*prameyas*) and the means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*), or what we know and how we know it.

The response to the “Buddhist dogmatists” gives five options:

(1): The means of knowledge are established by other means of knowledge. This leads to an infinite regress of each mean needing a further mean to justify itself.

(2): The means of knowledge establish themselves. If this is the case, however, the means of knowledge would not be related to the objects of knowledge since the means of knowledge do not require in any way to connect or rely on anything else for their justification.

(3): The means of knowledge are established by the objects of knowledge. This makes the means of knowledge unneeded, since the objects of knowledge are what establish the means. Further, this leads to circularity because the objects establish the means and the means then give us the objects.

(4): The means of knowledge are established by other means of knowledge of similar or other kinds. This option is a variation of (1) viewing the establishment relationship as more of a web than a direct line. Viewing it as a web, however, does not save this option from the infinite regress issues of (1) and also leaves it vulnerable to the circularity issue of (3).

(5): The means of knowledge are established without reason at all. This would mean that there is no explanation as to what makes a means of knowledge effective at being a means of knowledge. This outcome is the epistemological equivalent to a shrug and so is unacceptable for any epistemological effort.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* pg. 46.

The *pañcakoti* shows that there are five ways to defend the methods in which we acquire knowledge and that each of them fails to establish the means of knowledge themselves. Without a defensible means of knowledge, it follows that we should avoid positive knowledge claims. Nāgārjuna, then, is left in a position that avoids taking a position on knowledge.

The similarities that Nāgārjuna's *pañcakoti* has with Sextus' Modes are clear.⁶⁶ (1) is essentially the same as the Mode of Infinite Regress. (2) and (5) seek to avoid infinite regress and so mirror the Mode of Hypothesis in their attempts to set a foundation for means of knowledge. However, just as the Mode of Hypothesis fails, both (2) and (5) are shown to fail on pains of arbitrariness. (3) makes the same critique as the Mode of Circularity but also adds the charge of making the means of knowledge unnecessary if objects are doing the establishing. (4) combines the charges of circularity and regress, maintaining that modifying (1) does not solve its issues.

Sextus' own conclusion from the Modes was that the best course of action was to suspend judgement—not to posit positive claims about reality and not to endorse negative claims about reality. The Greek skeptic is in a sense agnostic towards knowledge, holding claims to be neither true nor false. Rather, the Greek skeptic lets the statements slip by, unassented to. Nāgārjuna, following the conclusions of the *pañcakoti*, reaches the same agnostic position. By showing the flaws in the epistemological project, Nāgārjuna does not endorse the negation of knowledge. Rather, he ends up in the middle ground, neither accepting nor denying claims. He simply claims that means of knowledge are not satisfactory by their own definitions and terms. Thus, with all the methods of establishing knowledge failing, Nāgārjuna leaves the project of knowledge aside. Nowhere better does he capture this position than when he states in *VV*:

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* pg. 47.

- 4: 29. If I had any propositions then this defect would be mine. I have, however, no proposition. Therefore there is no defect that is mine.⁶⁷

Nāgārjuna himself does not posit anything. He takes up the positions of others and shows by the other system's own merits that it does not hold true. Nāgārjuna occupies a positionless position, asserting that he makes no assertions. Truly, Nāgārjuna eloquently captures what the Pyrrhonians so adamantly defended: the suspension judgement.

Nāgārjuna's positionlessness is glaringly paradoxical. Absurdity, however, does not follow from the *pañcakoṭi*. A paraconsistent view of Nāgārjuna's work enables us to see that he is not building an independent epistemological position that denies knowledge. In this regard, Nāgārjuna is disagreeing with the Greek Academic skeptics. Rather, Nāgārjuna is siding with the Pyrrhonians by showing us that the entire enterprise of epistemology is itself flawed—no method we embark on toward truth and knowledge succeeds. The *pañcakoṭi* reveals the quest for truth is quixotic and mislead; that any position we take to justify our knowledge fails by its own merits. This position is meant to show us that truth itself is a flawed concept. Reality does not function with strictly defined concepts of truths and falsehoods. Epistemically charged views of the world are the mind's mistake of seeing the complex inner workings of reality as a mirror to our perceptions—a cardinal skeptic sin. The quagmire of truth has no clear exits. To march headlong into it is like entering a maze of mirrors in search for the source of the images upon the walls. Illusions and tricks lay in store for the epistemologist who takes up the realist creeds of the Stoics and Nyāya.

The skeptical Buddhist methodology of Madhyamaka does not stop its deconstruction of realist views with truth. A key target of its cutting skeptical method is metaphysical realism. Realism mirrors Aristotle and takes essences to be the foundational substances and structures of reality. Indeed, a central topic of Buddhist skepticism revolves around essence and identity. Madhyamaka, following decidedly in the spirit of the *pañcakoṭi*, argues that the concept of *self*,

⁶⁷ Garfield, J. L. (2002). *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*. Oxford University Press. pg 47.

and thus *essence*, is incoherent. To paint the metaphysical skepticism of Madhyamaka Buddhism, a more careful examination of Nāgārjuna’s positionlessness and the implications of the Three Marks is needed. This exploration of Buddhist metaphysical skepticism will bring skepticism itself into full view—ultimately revealing the paradoxical inner workings of a consistent skeptical position. Another Madhyamaka monk and philosopher, Śāntideva, and his critique of essence and the self, will serve to construct the metaphysical and ontological skepticism of the Buddhist tradition.

2.3 *Madhyamaka and Svabhāva*

First recall that the Three Marks give us two of the most significant claims in Madhyamaka: that all phenomena are impermanent and have no identity. The understanding of impermanence and non-identity both rely heavily on the ancient Indian concept of *svabhāva*. *Svabhāva* is a Sanskrit word translated as “own-being” and is “...equated with primary existence and denotes a specific ontological status; to exist with *svabhāva* means to be a part of the basic furniture of the world, independent of anything else that also happens to exist.”⁶⁸ Thus, *svabhāva* is that which makes an object the thing that it is. In other words, *svabhāva* is a “property an object could not lose without ceasing to be that very object.”⁶⁹ On this understanding, *svabhāva* is analogous to Aristotle’s concept of essence—it is the ‘what is’ of something.

Śāntideva explores the concept of *svabhāva* with the identity of a person. The self is what defines a human, and so the *svabhāva* of self must pick out what it is to be uniquely human. Two aspects arise in ancient India as defining what it is to be human: moral responsibility and free choice.⁷⁰ These distinct abilities define and identify the soul to be the unique thing that it is and essential to what it is to be human. Free choice and moral

⁶⁸ Westerhoff, J. C. (2017),

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Other examples of what a self may encompass can be one’s preferences, opinions, mental abilities, history, ambitions, an ability to learn and adapt, social associations, desires, wishes, goals, humor, loves, etc. However, for any single or combination of these qualities, the Madhyamaka strategy will run the same and reveal the same results.

responsibility belong so uniquely to humans that these aspects stand as what best captures a human self's *svabhāva*. A soul without the ability to freely choose or be responsible for its actions lacks the essential nature needed to be a soul. Indeed, if one imagines a person without the ability to freely choose or be morally responsible, it is difficult to imagine that person as even human.

Here, Madhyamaka begins to take a closer look. If one looks into an object, one does not find something that is unchanging and eternal that grounds that thing's identity as what it is. To illustrate, imagine a simple object like a cup. If the cup is to have an identity then there must be something substantial that makes the cup the thing that it is. Peering into the cup, we find that it is, in the case of the cup on my desk, made of plastic. "Being made of plastic" does not adequately define this cup, since there are many things made of plastic, and so we must continue looking deeper. Farther in, we find molecules and atomic compounds. Yet these atomic structures are also found in many things and so cannot serve to uniquely identify our cup. Downward we must continue to venture, finding smaller and more primary structures. Subatomic particles and quarks now buttress our cup—yet still we find no substantial *essence* of *cup*. Beyond energy, beyond space, beyond even strings—no matter what level we find ourselves on we can always ask the further question of what lies beneath. The search for essence is a metaphysical Mode of Hypothesis—planting the flag of *being* arbitrarily in the sand of reality. Eventually our investigation of the cup comes up empty. At the deepest level of reality not only do we find no essence of our cup, we find nothing at all. The substances of our world disappear and dissolve into the background like an ice cube on a hot day. The supposed "what is" of things is not found.

The Buddhist strategy to countering *svabhāva* is to seek the essence of anything and everything, showing that at each turn, *svabhāva* eludes us. Critically, the concept of identity is not limited to physical objects. Indeed, it seems that anything that we can identify, physically or mentally, would have something that makes it what it is. In the case of souls, the search for the

svabhāva of free choice and moral responsibility goes the way of the cup—emptiness. Śāntideva details the Madhyamaka position against *svabhāva*, focusing on souls, in his work the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*.⁷¹ Śāntideva writes:

- vi. 22. I feel no anger towards bile and the like, even though they cause intense suffering. Why am I angry with the sentient? They too have [causes] for their anger.

When he experiences bodily suffering, Śāntideva does not get angry with or blame his body. After all, his body is a physical system that is affected by other physical systems, some of which are vast and immensely complicated. There is no one aspect that bears the blame of him being hurt by bile; it is an impersonal causal chain of events that is devoid of responsibility-bearing agency. In the same way that we do not blame clouds for raining or fire for burning, Śāntideva places no blame in his bodily suffering. Śāntideva extends this reasoning to the sentient. People, like bile, are a part of the causal chain of the universe. What people believe, feel, and want are all products of massive causal forces that have been at work long before any individual we know today existed. The unique set of experiences a person collects over time shapes them into who they are—indeed, each person is the product of their past. This aspect undercuts one’s ability to freely choose because our agency is lost in the background of the universe. Śāntideva expands further, stating that:

- vi. 24. A person does not get angry at will, having decided ‘I shall get angry’, nor does anger well up after deciding ‘I shall well up.’

When a person feels angry, it is not because they have, as an independent agent, decided to feel that way *ex nihilo*. They feel angry because of prior conditions or states of affairs. Their own being has been shaped in such a way that anger arises in them when they encounter certain experiences. Any current phenomena (*dharma*), be it anger or bile, arise dependent on the *dharma* before. Śāntideva sums up:

⁷¹ Śāntideva translations taken from: Crosby, K. & Skilton, A. (1995), *Śāntideva: The Bodhicaryāvatāra*. Oxford University Press.

- vi. 25. Whatever transgressions and evil deeds of various kinds there are, all arise through the power of conditioning factors, while there is nothing that arises independently.

There is nothing in existence that does not have a prior cause. Every aspect of human existence is subject to what comes before it—this includes souls. Śāntideva sees souls as entirely dependent on the dharmas that precede them, thus eliminating the soul's ability to be an independent entity. If everything the soul does is not of the soul's own original intent, then it cannot stand as a morally responsible entity. Being suspect to prior conditions the soul becomes like bile—the next domino that falls in the chain of cause. It would be absurd to blame any single domino for falling, for it only falls because it is pushed. Additionally, if souls are not the originators of their actions, then they lack the ability to freely choose. Any volition or movement of the soul is a consequence of its prior conditions.

Śāntideva finds no agency or singularly responsible factor in the great chain of being either. He proceeds to deflate the *svabhāva* of moral responsibility and free will further by expanding his search to the world. He continues:

- vi. 26. Neither does the assemblage of conditioning factors have the thought, 'I shall produce'; nor does what is produced have the thought, 'I am produced'.

Nothing in the chain of causes or the chain itself stands independently and robustly in a position of responsibility or choice. There is no one dharma or collection of dharmas that are more responsible for anything than any other dharma; each only plays out as the prior dharma sets up, which itself only plays out as it was set up. Perhaps to the delight of Camus, even existence itself is lacking of any independence, responsibility, and choice.

Śāntideva moves to a direct objection to the self:

- vi. 27. The much-sought-for 'primal matter', or the imagined 'Self', even that does not come into being after deciding 'I shall become.'
- vi. 28. Since what has not arisen does not exist, who would then form the wish to come into existence? And since it would be occupied with its sphere of action it cannot attempt to cease to exist either.

- vi. 29. If the Self is eternal and without thought processes, then it is evidently inactive, like space. Even in contact with other conditioning factors, what activity can there be of something which is unchanging?

If something does not exist it would be impossible for that thing to bring itself into existence. It would have to exist in the first place to do anything. The self cannot be free of its prior causes, so it is not separate from the chain of causal existence. Therefore it is not the case that the self gives rise to itself. Further, since the soul is within the causal chain of existence, it is neither 'unchanging' nor eternal—such qualities would require that the soul exist separately from external causes. Śāntideva argues against the basic concepts that define souls—those of agency and responsibility. How we see ourselves—immutable souls that have a privileged existence beyond the physical trappings of the world—is in fact an illusion. Śāntideva shows that soul-searching leads us nowhere; the essences and *svabhāva* of our identity bottom out into emptiness, revealing themselves to be vacuous concepts leading nowhere.

We have failed to find the essence of cups or persons. The purported eternal, unchanging essence of things is shown to be faulty and worthy of rejection. By showing essence to be flawed, however, Buddhism establishes itself a kind of Mobius Strip of philosophy, first accepting a position then rejecting it on its own merits. Madhyamaka paradoxically sees existence as being without inherent being—the 'what is' of existence has no 'what is.' The consequences of this position are by no means minor. Indeed, in ancient India Madhyamaka philosophy was charged with being nihilistic and absurd.⁷² To counter these charges and to bring the paraconsistent position of Madhyamaka into full view, we will turn again to Nāgārjuna. This next step into paradox will focus on the *MMK*. Within the *MMK* is where the complete Madhyamaka stance on emptiness and its consequences on reality are established. Following the words of the *MMK* will also help us sketch the (perhaps) definitive skeptical position that both Madhyamaka and Pyrrhonian schools seek to establish.

⁷² Nihilism would deny existence itself. Madhyamaka is not nihilistic because it does not deny existence itself. Rather, it denies that reality exists in the way the realist claims. This nuance will be explored as the next section continues.

2.4 The Two Truths

The emptiness that lies at the bottom of the search for the essence of souls and cups extends to all of existence. Nothing in what we understand to be reality escapes the status of being empty. Once the project of finding *svabhāva* is expanded beyond souls and toward everything that possibly exists, emptiness' impact on the skeptical Buddhist worldview takes shape. Indeed, Nāgārjuna spends much of the *MMK* relentlessly critiquing *dharma*s from fire to causation, showing that none of them can be shown to have an independently existing *own-being* that establishes its existence. A few passages from the *MMK* give us a look into Nāgārjuna's (sometimes mystical) style of reason. These passages highlight reasoning surrounding the emptiness and the absence of *svabhāva*:

- 15: 9. If there is no essence,
What could become other?
If there is essence,
What could become other?
- 16: 6. Those who see essence and essential difference
And entities and nonentities,
They do not see
The truth taught by the Buddha.
- 18: 8. Everything is real and is not real,
Both real and not real,
Neither real nor not real
This is Lord Buddha's teaching.

In these passages, Nāgārjuna questions the implications of seeing objects as having *svabhāva*—if essences are eternal and objects require essence to account for their existence, and (as the Buddhist doctrine of the Three Marks, notably impermanence, implies) objects change over time, then it is the case that objects require an essence to exist and require the lack of essence to change. Nāgārjuna charges the realist with this contradictory consequence of essence, concluding that it should be rejected.⁷³ The explicit goal of these passages is to reveal that the very concept of *svabhāva*/essence leads one to contradiction. A good *Mādhyamika*,

⁷³ Garfield, J. L. (2002). pg. 95. Śāntideva also echoes these arguments in the passages previously cited from his *Bodhicaryāvatāra* vi.27-vi.29.

then, avoids contradiction by rejecting *svabhāva* altogether, consequently eliminating the imagined base-level of reality itself. Without essence at the bottom of everything, the ontological floor drops out—at the depths of reality lay emptiness. No substantial existence underpins existence. To see reality through this lens is to view reality correctly—without essence.

Madhyamaka contemporaries, unsurprisingly, had some qualms with this conclusion of essencelessness. A major and intuitive issue with this view is that if there is no base level to reality, that if nothing can give anything its being, then it seems Madhyamaka is committed to denying reality itself. Without the “what it was to be,” nothing can be. Opponents to Madhyamaka charge the position of emptiness as being nihilistic and ultimately self-refuting. The opponent’s line of reasoning begins with the position that the very act of making a claim is itself a phenomena—the claim itself is something that exists and so necessarily requires *svabhāva*.⁷⁴ The act of claiming that no phenomena exist is itself a phenomenon and so Madhyamaka refutes its claim by the very act of stating it. Essencelessness, then, is contradictory, incoherent, and absurd. Madhyamaka, however, rebuts this by saying that all phenomena lack essence is not, as the nihilistic objection claims, to say that phenomena do not exist at all. The opponents have misunderstood the Madhyamaka position—essencelessness does not deny that phenomena exist. Rather, it denies that phenomena exist in the way the realist claims—as having *svabhāva*.

The Madhyamaka response relies heavily on a particular Buddhist doctrine of the two truths. This doctrine originates with the Buddha himself—Siddhārtha Gautama. Siddhārtha became a buddha because he fully understood that reality has two truths: one conventional, one ultimate. Nāgārjuna describes the two truths in *MMK*:

24: 8. The Buddha’s teaching of the Dharma
Is based on two truths:
A truth of worldly convention

⁷⁴ This view of acts as phenomena is a consequence of how the Indian tradition viewed the concept of dharma (phenomena). While this interpretation is not ubiquitously endorsed in the Indian tradition, it is the dominant view in Buddhist thought, making it a primary objection to the Madhyamaka defense of essencelessness.

And an ultimate truth.

- 24: 10. Without a foundation in the conventional truth,
The significance of the ultimate cannot be taught.
Without understanding the significance of the ultimate,
Liberation is not achieved.

Conventional truth is the mundane, common truth of life. It is surface-level truth that allows people to navigate reality. Conventionally, water is wet, people have souls, and burritos are delicious. These statements, from a conventional point of view, are true of reality. These claims about reality pick out phenomena that actually happen in reality. It is correct for me to believe that certain dogs are soft or that the earth revolves around the sun. To the satisfaction of G. E. Moore, following Madhyamaka thought would make it absurd for me to deny that I don't have hands, for I am clearly using them to type this paper. Conventional truth encompasses the phenomena of our existence into one category—the common-sense appearances of the way things are. No Mādhyamika is denying that the reality we live life in is non-existent—after all, the conventional is treated as making legitimately true observations about reality.

Ultimate truth is the absolute nature of things—what is true of the ontological bedrock of existence is the ultimate truth of reality. The Three Marks (primarily impermanence and non-self) point towards the realm of the ultimate—the base-level of 'the what it was to be,' being *qua* being. These characteristics describe the actual nature of things and the way existence itself functions. The opponents of Madhyamaka would situate *svabhāva* as the primary occupant of ultimate truth because *svabhāva* is that which grounds all else, it is what is ultimately true of reality. Since Madhyamaka see *svabhāva* itself as lacking and incoherent, the ultimate truth for Madhyamaka is emptiness. Recall Śāntideva's exploration of *svabhāva*—he follows the path to the core of reality and is led toward nothing; the essences and *svabhāva* of the world bottom out into emptiness. The ultimate truth is that reality is empty—void of essence, lacking of substance, and missing its *own-being*.

With these tools, Madhyamaka can effectively respond to the charge of nihilism brought upon it. It is not the case that Madhyamaka denies the existence of things by rejecting *svabhāva*. By rejecting *svabhāva*, Madhyamaka rejects the status of the ultimate reality of things, not the conventional reality of things. Conventionally, things have identities, persist through time, and have causal powers—any Mādhyamika is happy to grant these points. The mistake is to assume that since conventional reality appears to have certain truths, it must be the case that ultimate reality has, in some sense, those same truths. A Mādhyamika however, denies *svabhāva* as the explanation for how the conventional functions as it does, claiming that while ultimate truth is empty, conventional truth is as we perceive. Thus, Madhyamaka is not a nihilistic position that denies the existence of things. Rather, it denies that things truly exist as they appear.

This position is hugely reminiscent of the Pyrrhonian description of impressions. The world appears to us to be a certain way but the buck stops there. We cannot reach past the appearances and impressions of the world toward the ontological bedrock of existence. Claims that go beyond impression are not worthy of assent since they are liable to be false—and believing in falsehoods, like essence or *svabhāva*, is to attach ourselves to suffering. As the Pyrrhonians follow the impressions of life and live by the Four Fold Prescription, Mādhyamika accept conventional truth and engage happily within it. Adherents of both schools live within how the world appears, clearly resisting the lure of dogmatism.

2.5 Emptiness

One may still wonder, despite the acceptance of both conventional and ultimate truths, how one is to conceive of emptiness itself. The opponents who charge Madhyamaka with nihilism understand emptiness to be an incoherent ultimate status of reality. This is because it is unclear how to conceptualize emptiness as something with inherent reality. Emptiness describes the lack of properties. But if things are identified as being empty, then it seems that they have the property of having no properties. Madhyamaka has reached a paradoxical

junction in its thought—the ultimate status of existence is that there is no ultimate status of existence. Nāgārjuna, however, in preempting this difficulty, bluntly emphasizes the import of a clear and nuanced understanding of emptiness:

24: 11. By misperception of emptiness
A person of little intelligence is destroyed.
Like a snake incorrectly seized
Or like a spell incorrectly cast.

Falling to the initial intuitive conception of emptiness as an actual property of conventional things is to misperceive emptiness. Specifically, the mistake here is to see emptiness itself as an existing property of things or, in other words, the essence of things being essenceless—the actual property of having no essence. This understanding of emptiness incorrectly seizes the snake. To illustrate the specific nuance regarding emptiness that Nāgārjuna has in mind, emptiness' role in relation to the two truths must first be more closely inspected.

It is not the case that the two truths function independently of one another, as two separate ways of interpreting the same thing. Both truths work in combination with one another at the same time—it is the connection of the truths that shape the correct view of existence. This is, after all, the Buddha's insight into reality. Thus, reality is both conventionally full and ultimately empty at the same time. What connects the two truths is the concept of dependent origination. Dependent origination relies on the Three Marks—that conventional phenomena exist impermanently and without *svabhāva*. Since nothing persists through time, each *dharma* is functionally instantaneous, flickering in and out of reality.⁷⁵ All *dharma* are an instantaneous occurrence of experience and arise in connection to the phenomenon that precedes them.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ There is considerable debate on how to conceive of time in Buddhism. It is unclear as to if *dharma*, given the description of impermanence, exist for some duration, exist for the smallest duration possible, or have no duration at all. Some conceptions take *dharma* as predetermined with one 'activating' once the preceding *dharma* is 'activated' and remaining 'activated' just long enough to 'activate' the following *dharma*. It is far beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a discussion on the Buddhist conceptions of time. Instead, this paper will work with the understanding that dharmas exist only for the shortest possible amount of time.

⁷⁶ *Dharma* in Buddhism lack essence and so are incapable of being substances. Consequently, the Buddhist worldview is not a substance metaphysics, but rather a process metaphysics. Since the concept of substance/essence/*svabhāva* is itself found to be incoherent in Madhyamaka, it is the *process* of dharmas dependently arising that is the fabric of reality. Thus, the conventional has experience as the basic unit of ontological

Every dharma is in the “great chain of being” and dependent upon what preceded it—*dharma* are shaped by what has come before and shape what is to come next. Each moment is a vast throng of experiences that arise, only then to give rise to the next moment’s multitude of *dharma*. The conventional is the endless march of instantaneous, dependently originated, empty *dharma*. Nāgārjuna describes the two truths in terms of dependent origination in *MMK*:

24: 18. Whatever is dependently co-arisen,
That is explained to be emptiness.
That, being a dependent designation,
Is itself the middle way.

24: 19. Something that is not dependently arisen,
Such a thing does not exist.
Therefore a nonempty thing
Does not exist.

If something has dependently arisen, it is impermanent and lacks *svabhāva*, making it empty of inherent existence. It is also the case that to call something empty is to say that it is dependently arisen, since being empty means that that something is impermanent and essenceless. Further, the picking out of dependently arising phenomena defines convention. The identity of souls, water, and burritos are all conventionally grouped collections of dharmas. The things themselves, “apart from conventions of individuation, [are] nothing but an arbitrary slice of an indefinite spatiotemporal and causal manifold.”⁷⁷ To be conventional, from this description, is to be a verbally identified collection of empty *dharma* and to be a verbally identified collection of empty *dharma* is to be conventional. The inexorably connected nature of dependent origination, emptiness, and convention have an interesting implication for emptiness itself. Nāgārjuna holds that it is a mistake to view emptiness itself as an actual existing property. This is because when emptiness itself is identified, it is done so conventionally. Emptiness—the quality of lacking *svabhāva*—is always verbally identified. Being verbally identified makes it a conventional thing. Being a conventional thing means that it is dependently originated—impermanent and empty.

structure. While this point is a central consequence to the overall Madhyamaka soteriological and philosophical project, its details are not necessary for the present motivation of emptiness.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* pg. 36.

Consequently, emptiness itself is in fact ultimately empty. The ultimate truth of emptiness is that everything, including emptiness itself, is empty of inherent existence. Emptiness, then, is not itself a description or property of phenomena because it itself is empty. Thus, no phenomenon actually has the property of emptiness. Thus, all phenomena are empty and so have no ultimate nature and emptiness is the ultimate nature of all phenomena.

Nāgārjuna has threaded the middle way within the conventional and the ultimate. Nowhere else is this clearer than in *MMK* 24: 19.⁷⁸ The conventional is not non-existent, since it is the character of the phenomenal world, and it is also not substantially existent, since it is empty. The ultimate is also not non-existent, since the true nature of things is ultimately empty, and it is also not inherently existent, since emptiness is itself empty.⁷⁹

Nāgārjuna's quest for the certain substantial foundations of existence has led him to paradox. Essence does not work how we think it does, knowledge is not founded how we think it is, and the structure of our world is not built how we think it is. Following the threads of reason from conventional to ultimate unravels them—fraying at the ends of thought, coming undone like Weezer's sweater. Ultimate uncertainty is the counterintuitive foundation of our conventional certainty—a paradoxical relationship of being both true and not true, known and unknown, substantial and insubstantial. It is here that the inner workings of skepticism come into full view. Starting with a position, skepticism can show that position to be faulty based on its own merits. Skepticism relentlessly applies every position's requirements to itself, showing that no position satisfies itself. Positions themselves, then, become lost causes, leaving the skeptic to step outside of positing all together, withholding even the position that they have no position.

Unsurprisingly, the positionless position is paradoxical. It is not, however, contradictory. The next step in understanding the skeptical position is to explore more precisely how skepticism functions paraconsistently. Nāgārjuna's emptiness will serve as the most explicit

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* pg. 36.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* pg. 36.

example of positionlessness. Once a clear understanding of skepticism's paraconsistent structure is established, we can return to Pyrrhonism to show how the endeavor of skepticism itself is not unique to Eastern or Western traditions, but rather a robust and nuanced philosophical position that, when understood properly, brings much philosophical merit to the table. We now turn headlong into paradox.

CHAPTER 3

3.1 *The Limits of Thought, Empty Emptiness, and Positionlessness*

Let us take stock. Paradoxes are counterintuitive conclusions drawn from reasonable premises. While the West has a long and shaky relationship with paradox, new light can be shed onto paradox by adopting a paraconsistent strategy. Paraconsistent logic denies that contradictions dissolve into absurdity and shows us that some paradoxes are simply veridical—it is the case that some things are indeed paradoxical. With this in mind, the long and winding road through Buddhism has left us at the doorstep of paradox once again. Emptiness, especially within Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka, is the paradoxical true status of reality. The world that we experience, while conventionally true, lacks essential existence and so is ultimately empty—all phenomena are empty and so ultimately have no nature, but emptiness is the ultimate nature of things. Thus, phenomena both have and lack ultimate nature.⁸⁰

Clearly characterizing Nāgārjuna's paradoxical position, however, is no easy task. This is because of its bold utilization of paradox. A feeling of never being able to adequately capture a paradox comes with the territory. One can restate and reformulate a paradoxical position and it will always end up sounding puzzling. Intuitively describing the counterintuitive may be the best example of paradox itself. As, perhaps, true to the human intellectual spirit, this challenge has been taken up by past and present thinkers. Indeed, we have already explored attempts to do just this from Anselm, Aristotle, and Kant. Each thinker wrestles with paradox in their own way and sets about its limits differently, but over and over again, the limits are encountered. Wittgenstein succinctly captures this paradoxical scenario in the *Tractatus*:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)⁸¹

⁸⁰ Garfield, J. L. (2002). pg. 103 (2002).

⁸¹ Translation by Pears and McGuinness, (1961). Quoted from Priest, (2002). pg. 251.

The endeavor of working in paradox is to climb to the top of the ladder only then to kick it out from underneath you. Jay Garfield and Graham Priest further describe the difficulties that Ludwig Wittgenstein brings to light during the process of exploring paradox:

No matter that we throw away the ladder *after* we have climbed it: its rungs were nonsensical *while* we were using them as well. So how could it have successfully scaffolded our assent? And if it did not, on what basis are we now to agree that all of that useful philosophy was nonsense all along?⁸²

It seems that within paradoxical systems there are no grounds on which to stand. Yet in order to discover that we have no ground, we must stand on some ground. The conclusions and beginnings wrap around each other, trading conceptual blows until the system is twisted into both defending and undermining itself.

In an attempt to pin down paradox for a closer examination, a look at the structure of paradox is in order. Here, we will closely follow Garfield and Priest's exploration of paradox by way of the Inclosure Schema.⁸³ The Inclosure Schema identifies the structure of paradoxes that arise at some limit and shows how a paradox is generated. Being able to identify where and how a paradox is generated within a reasonable theory is incredibly valuable for determining if that paradox is accurate or not. Being able to identify whether a paradoxical conclusion should be accepted as such or thrown out due to contradiction is critical when evaluating theories at the limit of thought.⁸⁴ We shall now apply the Inclosure Schema first to Kant to illustrate how it works, then to Nāgārjuna's emptiness to explore if his position is truly paradoxical or merely absurd.

The Inclosure Schema shows that paradoxes that discuss a limit (of thought, expression, or conception) have a structure that implies two things. The first aspect is that some view about

⁸² Garfield, J. L. (2002). pg. 89. Original emphasis.

⁸³ *Ibid.* pg. 89.

⁸⁴ For a far more extensive look at limit paradoxes, see Priest's *Beyond the Limits of Thought*, (2002). Priest's dialethic approaches to philosophical issues are not common or immediately intuitive and so remain subject to debate. While this thesis is heavily indebted to Priest's volume and its variety of interpretation, it is by no means put forth as the canonical interpretation. Rather, as stated, this paper takes Priest's unique approach to these classes of philosophical issues to be indispensable in furthering our understanding of difficult topics surrounding thought and existence. For this reason, this paper affords Priest's work serious philosophical merit.

a certain limit actually transcends the defined limit. This aspect of *Transcendence* is the portion of a paradox that claims that something cannot be either expressed or conceptualized because it is beyond the limit of our ability to do so. The second aspect is that the view about the certain limit is within the limit. This aspect of *Closure* is the portion of a paradox that is practically established by the very theorizing of the limit in question. Combined, transcendence and closure create “*Inclosure*: a totality, Ω , and an object, o , such that o both is and is not in Ω .”⁸⁵ Kant offers a clear example of this structure. It is impossible to know anything about *noumena* (*Transcendence*), but by making that claim he seems to know something about *noumena* (*Closure*). Thus, in regard to the totality of knowledge, Ω , for *noumena*, o , it is the case that o is both in and not in Ω .

For Nāgārjuna, Ω is all phenomena, or more bluntly, everything that exists. Since the totality encompasses all things, any phenomenon is a member of the totality of phenomena. We can, from the totality of phenomena, pick out many groups of phenomena and group them according to what natures they share. We could pick out all brown dogs or all coffee tables—it must only be the case that whatever the nature of that group, all the members of that group share it. Madhyamaka takes all phenomena to be empty, so we can claim that all phenomena share the same common nature of emptiness. Further, since all phenomena are empty, and the totality is comprised of all phenomena, we can conclude that the totality of phenomena is empty. This first conclusion is the *Closure* portion of our *Inclosure*—the Madhyamaka position that the ultimate nature of everything is emptiness. The *Closure* conclusion states that for any group of phenomena we pick, the phenomena (and thus the group itself) is empty. From this first conclusion, we know that it is the case that everything has no nature. This is *Closure* because it is something that we can reason to within our own limits and is precisely what Nāgārjuna and Śāntideva do when they discuss *svabhāva*.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* pg. 89.

Emptiness, however, cannot itself be the nature of anything since it itself is empty. Since everything is empty, it is the case that things actually have no nature at all. Thus, it is the case that no phenomena have a nature. Consequently, it is the case that the totality of things also has no nature. Nāgārjuna shows this aspect of emptiness by his investigation of phenomena—one bottoms out into nothing in every scenario. This is the *Transcendence* conclusion of our *inclosure*: emptiness cannot be the nature of things. This is Nāgārjuna’s position that emptiness itself is empty and so cannot itself be ultimately true.

Thus, Nāgārjuna has two conclusions. First is *Closure*: the totality, Ω , is empty, o . The second is *Transcendence*: the totality, Ω , cannot be empty, not o . In other words, all phenomena are empty and empty is not a way anything can be— Ω is both o and not o . The ultimate truth of everything is that all things are empty (*Closure*). From this we also conclude that nothing can actually be empty (*Transcendence*). The conclusions undercut themselves—everything is empty but nothing can be empty (*Inclosure*).⁸⁶ Nāgārjuna’s careful investigation of essence and emptiness has led him squarely to a contradiction. He succinctly captures the paradoxical inclosure of emptiness in the *MMK*:

22. 11. “Empty” should not be asserted.
 “Nonempty” should not be asserted.
 Neither both nor neither should be asserted
 They are only used nominally.

It is true of all things that they are essenceless. If nothing has essence, then the state of the world is essencelessness. If essencelessness defines all things, then the essence of things is essencelessness. To search for ultimate truths is to find that there are none. But having no truth

⁸⁶ The technical logical formulation of Nāgārjuna’s inclosure, given by Garfield and Priest (Garfield, pg. 103-104. (2002), Priest, pg. 276. (2002)) takes the form:

- (1) $\Omega = \{x: \varphi(x)\}$ exists, and $\psi(\Omega)$.
- (2) For all $X \subseteq \Omega$ such that $\psi(X)$:
 - (i) $\neg \delta(X) \in X$ (*Transcendence*)
 - (ii) $\delta(X) \in \Omega$ (*Closure*)
 - $\varphi(x)$ as “ x is empty”
 - $\varphi(X)$ as “ X is a set of things with some common nature”
 - $\delta(X)$ as “the nature of things in X ”

Applying δ to Ω gives $\delta(\Omega) \in \Omega$ and $\neg \delta(\Omega) \in \Omega$.

is the ultimate state of existence itself. Nāgārjuna has pulled a bait-and-switch—the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth. The true nature of existence is no nature at all.

Emptiness, under Nāgārjuna's scheme, undermines itself. It is not the case that Nāgārjuna accepts emptiness as the true nature of all things because emptiness denies itself, leaving Nāgārjuna defending no epistemic, ontological, or metaphysical position. There is not a way that ultimate reality is—it cannot be full of *svabhāva* and it cannot be empty. We are left in a position of skepticism—the suspension of judgement, a positionless position.⁸⁷

We can turn back now to the Pyrrhonians. Navigating between the various interpretations of Pyrrhonism lead this paper to paradox—can a Pyrrhonian believe nothing? By adopting a paraconsistent view on paradox, we can take paradoxes seriously—not as missteps in logic and reasoning but rather as legitimate features of theories that explore the limits of thought. Madhyamaka is the strongest example of how a paradoxical position can be consistent and defensible. We can use the paraconsistent strategies that underlie Nāgārjuna's skepticism to reevaluate Pyrrhonism and show that the Pyrrhonians also carve out a skeptical positionless position.

3.2 The Pyrrhonian Debate

To recall, there are two main interpretations of Pyrrhonism. The first is urbane Pyrrhonism, endorsed by Frede. The urbane skeptic assents to ordinary beliefs while suspending judgement on philosophical and scientific beliefs. The second view is rustic Pyrrhonism, endorsed by Burnyeat. The rustic skeptic has no beliefs whatsoever, withholding assent to even common beliefs. Sextus' writing seems to defend both of these positions. The seemingly contradictory inner workings of skepticism lead scholars to see Pyrrhonism as a

⁸⁷ It is important to note that Nāgārjuna himself does not explicitly endorse or reject paradox. For this reason it is a matter of debate if a paraconsistent view was indeed his considered position. It is clear, however, that Nāgārjuna uses the power of contradiction against his opponents to show the incoherency of concepts like *svabhāva*. It may be that Nāgārjuna rejects contradictions that rely on underlying assumptions, but finds no such assumptions behind the concept of emptiness itself. While this issue of if Nāgārjuna's concept of emptiness itself is different from other concepts is fascinating, it is speculation on my part. Pursuing this question further is beyond the scope of this paper and so will be left aside.

philosophical knot—a puzzle that needs swift, cutting reason to resolve. The tension that lies within Pyrrhonism between urbane and rustic interpretations is centered on the core of the knot—what Pyrrhonians actually believe.

The medical interpretation of Barnes lands the closest to a paraconsistent interpretation, claiming that whether urbane or rustic skepticism is appropriate is a pragmatic consideration. The medical interpretation attempts to avoid contradiction by making the pragmatic application of skepticism the deciding factor rather than some feature of skepticism itself. This solution, however, only superficially resolves the tension within Pyrrhonism. Seeing the Pyrrhonian as mostly a doctor reads as *ad hoc*—it does not clear up why Sextus seems to defend both the urbane and rustic positions. Barnes' solution does not go far enough into skepticism to motivate why a Pyrrhonian could comfortably lean on the pragmatic medical interpretation. It may be that Pyrrhonians can pragmatically apply skepticism depending on the patient, but this pragmatic ability indicates something more significant about skepticism itself. Beneath the medical interpretation lies the deep epistemic concerns that originally motivate skepticism: questions of certainty, knowledge, perception, and truth. It is how Sextus approaches these more central issues that allows him to fit into a medical-esque interpretation. The transitions from urbane to rustic and back again are features of skepticism itself, not a pragmatic interpretation of skeptical application.

It is not contrived to read Sextus as defending a paraconsistent-esque position that follows in the spirit of Nāgārjuna's positionlessness. The key skeptical sections that reveal Sextus to be positionless are Book I.18-28, the Skeptical Phrases. In these sections, Sextus covers how skeptics can communicate claims without committing themselves to what those claims state. By speaking skeptically, the Pyrrhonian avoids endorsing positions while still being able to speak about the positions. These phrases allow skeptics to truly evaluate positions that make dogmatic statements without having to themselves ascribe to the dogmas. In a sense,

these phrases enable to the skeptic to evaluate positions from no position. Sextus describes the phrase “No more”:

- I. 191. Thus, although the phrase ‘In no more way more’ exhibits the distinct character of assent or denial, we do not use it this way: we use it indifferently and in a loose sense, either for a question or for ‘I do not know which of these things I should assent to and which not assent to.’ Our intention is to make clear what is apparent to us, and as to what phrase we use to make this clear we are indifferent. Note too that when we utter the phrase ‘In no way more’ we are not affirming that it is itself certainly true and firm: here too we are only saying how things appear to us.

Sextus is explicit that the language of the skeptic endorses no position. It does not affirm nor deny—it stands indifferently in the middle of all positions. The skeptic, in regard to manners concerning dogma, remains epistemically unmoved. Sextus is incredibly careful about building a position that is undoubtedly in doubt. He builds Pyrrhonian equipollence into any space where someone could fault him for making a dogmatic claim. This strategy is clear when Sextus describes the phrase “I suspend judgement”:

- I. 196. We use ‘I suspend judgement’ for ‘I cannot say which of the things proposed I should find convincing and which I should not find convincing,’ making clear that objects appear to us equal in respect of convincingness and lack of convincingness. Whether they are equal, we do not affirm: we say what appears to us about them, when they make an impression on us.”

Even stating that two things are equally unconvincing is something that Sextus avoids, for this would commit him to having a position on what it is for something to be actually unconvincing. He does not assent to any understanding of “equal,” “convincing,” or “unconvincing”—Sextus’ position is suspended between the convincing and the unconvincing, favoring neither and remaining skeptical of the epistemic standards of assessment. The Pyrrhonian’s positionlessness is captured when Sextus describes the phrase “I determine nothing”:

- I. 197. Determining we deem to be not merely saying something but making an utterance about an unclear object and assenting to it. For in this sense Skeptics will perhaps be found to determine nothing—not even ‘I determine nothing’ itself. For this this is not a dogmatic supposition (i.e. assent to something unclear) but a phrase which shows our feeling. Thus when Skeptics say ‘I determine nothing,’ what they say is this: ‘I now feel

in such a way as neither to posit dogmatically nor to reject any of the things falling under this investigation.'

Sextus explicitly states that when a skeptic claims they determine nothing, that statement includes itself. The skeptic does not even determine that they determine nothing. Epistemically, then, Pyrrhonism occupies the Madhyamaka-esque positionless position. Indeed, Sextus himself describes this directly, stating that:

I. 196. Suspension of judgement gets its name from the fact that the intellect is suspended⁸⁸ so as neither to posit nor to reject anything because of the equipollence of the matters being investigated.

Sextus intentionally uses suspension to describe the epistemic state of the intellect as being withheld from judgement. Taking no position does not mean the intellect is inert in regard to epistemic situations. The mind thinks, apprehends, and perceives, but takes no positions in that it makes no motions toward or away from any conclusions. It acknowledges and recognizes the impressions it receives but takes no step into the epistemic arena offered by the impressions themselves. Speaking skeptically reveals the state of the skeptic's mind: positionlessness.

Surrounded by self-undermining positions, the skeptic's language reflects their suspension of judgement. Sextus implicitly states this when he says:

I. 206. In the case of all the skeptical phrases, you should understand that we do not affirm definitely that they are true—after all, we say that they can be destroyed by themselves, being cancelled along with what they are applied to, just as purgative drugs do not merely drain the humors from the body but drive themselves out too along with the humors.

Like Nāgārjuna's emptiness, the Pyrrhonian's positions refute themselves. By saying "no more this than that" the skeptic applies their suspension of judgement to the topic at hand as well as the position itself. "I determine nothing" is not the negation of all determinations, but a description of the absence of determinations themselves. By uttering the statement, however, Pyrrhonians seem to be determining something (namely, that they determine nothing). But committing to the position of "no determinations" is a dogmatic position that Pyrrhonians do not

⁸⁸ 'Suspension of judgement' comes from the Greek verb *epoché* meaning 'to hold back', 'to check' (used of e.g. holding your breath, suspending payment)(Annas, J. & Barnes, J. (eds.) (2000). pg. 49).

endorse. Pyrrhonians must state this contradictory statement to accurately describe their skeptical suspension. The utterance, however, is not an exception to the rule—it remains true that the Pyrrhonians do no determining. The Pyrrhonian's position is paradoxical—it determines that it determines nothing, not even its indetermination. This is suspension of judgement—a sidestep from epistemic positions altogether; an endless cycle of climbing ladders and kicking them out from underneath. Pyrrhonians float above epistemic groundings, as if suspended in air. The ground is dogma and Pyrrhonism is winning.

Reading Sextus with an endorsement of skeptical positionlessness gives key sections of *PH* a new light. Consider again one of the key passages:

- I. 13. When we say that skeptics do not hold beliefs, we do not take 'belief' in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that belief is acquiescing in something; for skeptics assent to the feelings forced upon them by appearances—for example, they would not say, when heated or chilled, 'I think I am not heated (or chilled).' Rather, we say that they do not hold beliefs in the sense in which some say that belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences; for Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything unclear.

If we understand Sextus as intending the Pyrrhonian position to be truly in a state of suspension, then when the skeptic is heated or chilled they acknowledge the impression but attach no further meaning or interpretation beyond that initial impression. It seems to the skeptic that they are chilled and so they assent to this impression in so far as it is an impression that they are experiencing. But they "do not assent to anything unclear" and so do not assent to the belief that they are in reality truly chilled. The Pyrrhonian, then, assents to being chilled because of the impression that they are chilled and does not assent to being chilled because they withhold assent on matters of scientific or philosophical investigation. This can be better understood if we use the Madhyamaka understanding of the doctrine of the two truths: Pyrrhonians conventionally (immediate impressions) believe that they are cold, but ultimately (philosophical and scientifically) do not believe that they are cold. At a single time, the Pyrrhonian does and does not believe that they are cold.

Reading Pyrrhonism as following the Madhyamaka-style interpretation follows aspects of both Frede and Burnyeat's interpretations. It follows Frede's understanding of Pyrrhonism in that the skeptic can assent to common impressions while withholding assent from statements that reach beyond those impressions. Pyrrhonism is urbane in the conventional—the common-sense beliefs are completely acceptable in so far as Pyrrhonians assent only to their impressions. Indeed, Sextus endorses this understanding of impressions when he explains the Four Fold Prescription: that the skeptic follows the laws, religions, cultures, and natures of the conventional. The Madhyamaka-style reading also follows Burnyeat's interpretation of Pyrrhonism in that assent is understood to be an epistemic action equal to belief. Assenting to something is to dogmatically believe it. At the ultimate level, Pyrrhonism is solidly rustic, for Pyrrhonians withhold all assent to impressions. Sextus makes this clear in his many descriptions of Pyrrhonians employing Modes, equipollence, and skeptical phrases to show that despite the impressions of the conventional, there is ultimately no discernable fact of the matter—that assenting to something is to dogmatically assent to falsehoods.

An example may help further illustrate how a Pyrrhonian might function if both urbane and rustic interpretations are paraconsistently meshed. Consider a Pyrrhonian and any object. When a skeptic has an impression of an object, they assent to the impression of it because it appears that there is an object. The impression makes the world seem a certain way to the skeptic (namely, that there is an object) and the Pyrrhonian is happy to follow the Four Fold Prescription and assent. This assent is conventional—commonly, there are objects and we interact with them. No great epistemic tragedy has befallen the skeptic for assenting to an object—their quest for *ataraxia* is not hindered by mere things. Here, it may be claimed that the Pyrrhonian is dogmatically believing a proposition about the world (namely, that there is an object). While conventionally it seems that there is an object, and the “seeming” of the object is something the Pyrrhonian assents to; it is not the case that they assent to the impressions as being true of the world. The skeptic emphasizes that conventional assent, even to objects, is

skeptical. “There is an object” should be understood as “there appears to be an object.” Since the object is being relayed to the skeptic by impressions, and impressions are untrustworthy (as shown by the Modes and equipollence), they have no good reason to accept the ultimate truth or untruth of the object beyond the current impressions. The skeptic does not reach past the acceptable appearance of the object to the unacceptable dogmatic beliefs about objects. It appears that there is an object but that may not ultimately be the case. The skeptic withholds assent to the ultimate status of the object since the foundation for their experience of the object is unreliable impressions, but conventionally assents to the impressions that they have as being how the world appears to them. In a sense, the skeptic does not believe what they believe—there appears to be an object and so the skeptic believes that there is an object, but that appearance may be faulty so the skeptic does not believe there truly is an object.

Our original antimony returns: Pyrrhonians assent and withhold assent to impressions. They simultaneously take impressions of the world to be true and take no impression as worthy of truth. This paper has shown that contradiction of this sort is acceptable if viewed paraconsistently. The inconsistency surrounding beliefs, impressions, appearances, and assent all point toward a paraconsistent construction underlying Pyrrhonism. Frede is correct in that the Pyrrhonians assent to conventional belief and Burnyeat is correct in that they truly assent to nothing. To show this explicitly, we will formulate Pyrrhonism following the spirit of the Inclosure Schema. We begin with a totality. The totality for Pyrrhonism is entirely populated by impressions. Impressions are experiences of the world and everything a skeptic experiences is in the form of an impression. So, anything a Pyrrhonian could ever assent to is an impression and a member of the totality. Pyrrhonians assent to impressions in so far as impressions are the experience of the world (*Closure*). This is clear from how Sextus handles the statement “I am chilled” and his discussion on the Four Fold Prescription. Pyrrhonians do not contest that the world appears to be a certain way. But, Pyrrhonians withhold all assent to impressions because they are untrustworthy reporters of truth (*Transcendence*). This is clear from how Sextus

handles statements like “it is day” and the discussions of Modes and equipollence. Pyrrhonians do contest that the world is as it appears. Thus, we generate our *Inclosure*: Pyrrhonians assent to how things appear and do not assent to what appears to be. Conventionally, impressions are acceptable as they shape the life of the skeptic. Ultimately, impressions are fallible and so should be avoided. Pyrrhonians believe that the world appears to be the way that it is, but do not believe that the world is as it appears.

Pyrrhonians must enter the realm of belief to make claims about belief. It would be absurd to expect that legitimate criticism of belief should come from outside of belief itself—it is not clear what this kind of criticism would even look like. In order to step into the arena of belief, the skeptic must have beliefs. Once inside, however, the skeptic works to show that beliefs themselves are suspect and should be avoided. Thus, the skeptic’s suggestion is to avoid entering the arena whenever possible. This suggestion, though, can only be relayed to those in the stadium if the skeptic enters it. The skeptic’s position becomes paradoxical—one must believe in order to show that one should avoid believing.

We have arrived at an interpretation of Pyrrhonism that follows in the spirit of Barnes. Barnes’ medical interpretation states that Pyrrhonians can endorse either urbane or rustic Pyrrhonism based on whose dogmatism is being confronted. This solution is pragmatic—the Pyrrhonian is a doctor of the mind, adjusting the antidote’s strength to the ailments of their patients. Reading Pyrrhonism this way, while coming closest to the paraconsistent understanding, leaves the structural tension between urbane and rustic Pyrrhonism unresolved: the state of a Pyrrhonian’s belief is unsettled if it is dependent on their interlocutor. Barnes recognizes the antimony in Pyrrhonism but does not attribute it to skepticism itself. The paraconsistent reading, however, shows us that it is the structure of skepticism that leads Pyrrhonians to endorse both urbane and rustic understandings. Indeed, Barnes’ medical interpretation is reasonable because of the paradoxical structure of skepticism. As to the seemingly contradictory position of “belief that one believes nothing,” Frede seeks to shift the

emphasis on “believe that” while Burnyeat shifts to “believes nothing.” These moves undercut the full force of Sextus’ skepticism: “believe that one believes nothing” is Sextus’ fully considered position. Throughout *PH*, Sextus weaves a position that steps back and forth between urbane and rustic understandings. This movement does not, however, indicate that skepticism is wishy-washy and inconsistent. Rather, it indicates that skepticism itself is a position that is built to step between the urbane and rustic. The structure of Pyrrhonism lies paradoxically over both interpretations.

3.3 Philosophical Skepticism

Thus far, our efforts have been focused on Sextus, Pyrrhonism, Nāgārjuna, and Madhyamaka. The intricacies of Greek and Indian skepticism are numerous and worthy of further discussion, but it is not on this point that this paper will conclude. Instead, we will engage our skeptical persuasion and step back from the nuances of Frede, Burnyeat, Priest, and Garfield. We shall reflect on the endeavor of skepticism itself and its philosophical merits, ultimately closing our discussion on behalf of the positionless position.

Skepticism has not been given a fair shake since few skeptics have been able to do as Wittgenstein describes and kick the ladder out from underneath. Anything less than utmost care leads into contradiction and incoherence. In the field of philosophy, skepticism receives lip service; largely brushed away as something that needs to be addressed but not taken too seriously. Despite the occasional insight from skeptics, the rest of the field does not truly find the endeavor of skepticism convincing enough to delve into. Even though Sextus and Nāgārjuna have climbed up and kicked out their ladders, they remain largely unengaged. Perhaps it is because even in success a skeptic’s position is odd and difficult to explain—kicking one’s ladder out is a strange feat no matter how expertly one performs it. In the end, skeptics endeavor to show that regardless what ladder one climbs, the ladder can still be toppled. It is not the mere act of knocking over ladders that interest skeptics; it is the fact that ladders can be knocked over. The reward for the diligent skeptic is to see that the truly foolish act is building and

climbing ladders. Yes, ladders are useful in life, but the goal should not be to build a ladder so that one may reside on top of it. In true skeptical fashion, however, skeptics recognize that without the field of dogmatic ladder-climbers, the insight that climbing ladders is folly would not be learned. After all, one cannot kick out the ladder if one does not first climb it.

Skepticism is paradoxical at heart. Skeptics make substantial philosophical claims that lead them to not make any substantial claims. They investigate the world critically and analytically and then navigate the world simply based on how it seems. Mādhyamika ultimately deny the truth of soul and substance but conventionally accept the truth of soul and substance. Pyrrhonians hotly reject all beliefs but assent to the common beliefs of everyday life. It is no surprise that philosophical systems of interpretation whose goal is to reveal flaws in philosophical systems of interpretation turn out to be paradoxical. Incredible care and diligence is required to achieve the feat of using systems to undermine themselves. By carefully examining skeptical schools, we come to see that skepticism itself functions at the limits of thought. Only at the edges can one turn back to see the path one has taken.

It is not through any specific system of interpretation that our woes will be resolved. Skeptics even hint that it may be the very endeavor of resolution through interpretation that leads us astray. Indeed, skepticism is a philosophical position that cuts its teeth on the response. Sextus and Nāgārjuna carve skepticism out of the theories of others, showing that within reason and observation are insurmountable worries. The most bulletproof formulations still have creases and joints that reveal our deepest levels of intuition. Skepticism peels apart the layers of reasoning to see what lies beneath, to see if the foundations support what is built up. If we begin with the systems themselves, recognizing that the very structure of our understanding remains shrouded in mystery, we find where we should begin. How we perceive, how we know, and how we live are the starting points of our investigations, not what we perceive, what we know, and what our lives are. The edges define our space and so it is at the edges that we should begin. Skepticism steps directly to the limits of human existence to search

for the anchors of reason and deliberation. While the search may turn up little, the rewards of the search far outweigh the absence of substantial discoveries. The platitude that the journey is more valuable than the destination applies more properly to skepticism than any other philosophy. Indeed, skepticism seems to have taken this platitude as its mantra, for it journeys incessantly toward no defined destination. The travelling itself, however, brings tranquility to the mind. How beautiful the surroundings are when one has nowhere to go.

Ultimately, skepticism's merit comes from its ability to reveal reason's weaknesses. Reason is not an impenetrable bulwark of truth. Those who dogmatically ignore the flaws in reason live behind unsafe walls, disturbed by change and challenge. Skepticism enables one to see one's flaws, allowing one to avoid mistakes that may lead to suffering or distress. Skeptics step back far enough to see the gaps and cracks in the reason and experience that define our lives. They deal with the very structure of the human experience; carefully navigating the foundations of our lives so as to avoid stumbling into pitfalls. Skepticism seeks until something satisfies, until all questions are answered, until theory stands its ground. At the edges, however, skepticism finds that the chains of reason mooring our theories are loosely strewn across the sand of intuition like unshackled statues of Daedalus. Skepticism does not attempt to hammer chains into the shifting sand. Knowing that one's beliefs and claims rest on the turbid borders of reason is valuable in itself. Turning away from the border, the efforts of the skeptic can be spent elsewhere and so they turn to what we do seem to know—our life experiences. Concerns of how to live focus the skeptic's attention. Despite the collective seeking, investigating, and exploration of reason and intuition, the creed of decreasing suffering remains. Skepticism finds little else to support for there is little else that experience tells us. The fruit of skepticism is the road toward the peaceful mind, *ataraxia*, and *nirvāṇa*.

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