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James Mark Shields
Bucknell University, jms089@bucknell.edu

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Buddhism and Scepticism

Historical, Philosophical, and Comparative Perspectives

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Scepticism is accordingly a form of belief. Dogma cannot be abandoned; it can only be revised in view of some more elementary dogma which it has not yet occurred to the sceptic to doubt; and he may be right in every point of his criticism, except in fancying that his criticism is radical and that he is altogether a sceptic.
– George Santayana, Skepticism and Animal Faith, *1923*

The past century and a half has seen various attempts in both Asia and the West to reform or re-conceptualize Buddhism by adding a simple, often provocative, qualifier. This paper examines some of the links between "secular," "critical," "sceptical," and "radical" Buddhism in order to ascertain possibilities in thinking Buddhism anew as a 21st-century "project" with philosophical, ethical, and political resonance. In particular, I am motivated by the question of whether "sceptical" Buddhism can coexist with Buddhist *praxis*, conceived as an engaged response to the suffering of sentient beings in a globalized and neoliberal industrial capitalist world order. Let me state from the start that my attempt to make sense of these terms and to draw connections between them is very much *in nuce*; that is, a work in progress that might serve as a kind of meta-analysis of the research I have undertaken over the past decade and continue to pursue in my various projects. As a result, this chapter is also autobiographical in the sense that it is rooted in my own ways of thinking, including my biases, about the ideas, movements, and persons I have chosen to study.

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Sceptical Buddhism?

Many introductions to philosophical scepticism in the West begin by commenting on the deep and significant relation between scepticism and epistemology. Since the classical period, but perhaps even more so after René Descartes (1596–1650), Western theories of knowledge have developed in response to (either in defense of or in opposition to) various forms of scepticism (see, e.g., the entry on "skepticism" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Often, this amounts to a particular philosophical programme engaging in a limited scepticism about particular sources of or avenues for knowledge (e.g., empiricists about *a priori* knowledge). And of course, religions also develop on the basis of (perhaps more) limited forms of scepticism: towards prevailing ritual practices, institutions, dogmas, cultural values, and so on. In this sense, all of the world's major religious traditions emerged as "reform" movements, breaking away from or seeking out new permutations within existing religious and social practices. But there are also important distinctions to be made between simple doubt, the impulse for religious reform, and *philosophical* scepticism as generally understood. Most importantly, as Wittgenstein has shown, the former two instances *imply* a ground of belief about the way things *really are*; that is, doubt in the ordinary sense requires the possibility of its removal ("A doubt without an end is not even a doubt" [1]). Another way to say this is that ordinary doubt or incredulity—and, I would add, the "doubt" that normally undergirds the impulse to religious reform—is part and parcel of holding things to be true; that is, having at least a minimal commitment to metaphysics, ontology, and/or cosmology.

   Philosophical scepticism is decidedly more thoroughgoing in its critique of all forms of knowledge, rather than an exchange of true certainty for falsehood or delusion. Indeed, philosophical scepticism would seem to be a stance that is incompatible with metaphysical belief—or at least, one that must be held in significant tension with even a minimal commitment to metaphysics. Pyrrho of Elis (c. 365–275 BCE) is often considered the founder of philosophical scepticism in the West, though his works are mainly known through the writings of Sextus Empiricus, who lived some four

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[1] Wittgenstein (1972/1969, §625).

centuries later. Pyrrhonian sceptics "withhold assent to every non-evident proposition" (Klein, 2015)—though to be clear, this also includes the meta-proposition that *we cannot have knowledge of any sort*. Here, we begin to see both an opening, but also, perhaps, a lacuna in this form of thoroughgoing scepticism: sceptics of the Pyrrhonian variety are resolute anti-dogmatists, but (and by virtue of such) they are *not* in fact committed to the positive rejection of epistemology. Rather, they are, in a sense, setting aside the question, or perhaps changing the subject away from epistemology. We will return to this below.

The tradition of scepticism in the West has largely not followed Pyrrho and Sextus, however. Rather, Descartes's writings engage and expand upon what the Pyrrhonians derided as Academic scepticism (dating back to Carneades [214–129 BCE]), which, for all its insistence on "radical doubt," ultimately relies on a process of argument and reasoning to reach conclusions such as the famous *cogito*. Interestingly—as we will see below—one of the claims of the Japanese Critical Buddhists was that Descartes was, in several respects, a model or paradigm for contemporary Buddhism, because of his insistence on radical (methodological) doubt and his commitment to a kind of intellectual integrity and personal autonomy of belief. Sextus outlines the distinction between the Pyrrhonian and Academic sceptics in terms of a subtle but significant difference in their understanding of "belief"—here used in the context of "assent to propositions." Whereas the Academics believe with "strong impulse or inclination," Pyrrhonian "belief" is a form of non-resistance: "simply to follow without any strong impulse or inclination" (Sextus Empiricus, 1933, 1.230). This last description sounds remarkably akin to the way certain forms of Asian philosophical and religious traditions are interpreted in the modern West, not least Daoism and Buddhism, though it is an interpretation that has been challenged in the past century by Asian Buddhists who claim that such "topical" or "ataraxic" Buddhism relinquishes its foundational commitment to ethics; namely, to liberating all beings from the round of suffering. In what follows, I will trace a brief history of such challenges, beginning with the most recent one offered by Stephen Batchelor.

Batchelor's Secular Buddhism

For the past several decades, the British Buddhist activist and scholar Stephen Batchelor has pushed the edges of the Dharma by proposing a demythologized approach to Buddhism—a view that, on one hand, has clear roots in the "modern" or "modernist" forms of Buddhism that have flourished

in Europe and the United States since the 1920s (if not a few decades before in Japan), but which also presents itself as a radically "contemporary" form of practice, best suited for Buddhists of the early 21st century. One of Batchelor's early works, *Buddhism without Beliefs* (1998), was instrumental in shaping my own interests in Buddhism in relation to Western philosophy and ethics. In 2015, Batchelor published a book that summarizes his thinking over this two-decade span. Invoking both the work of the post-theist Christian theologian Don Cupitt and the meta-cultural analysis of Charles Taylor, the book is entitled *After Buddhism: Rethinking the Dharma for a Secular Age*.[2]

In introducing the concept of "secular Buddhism," Batchelor insists that he does not

> envision a Buddhism that seeks to discard all traces of religiosity, that seeks to arrive at a dharma that is little more than a set of self-help techniques that enable us to operate more calmly and effectively as agents or clients, or both, of capitalist consumerism. (Batchelor, 2015, p. 17)

Indeed, he argues,

> we could make the case that the practice of mindfulness, taken out of its original context, reinforces the solipsistic isolation of the self by immunizing practitioners against the unsettling emotions, impulses, anxieties, and doubts that assail our fragile egos. (Batchelor, 2015, p. 17)

While this revolt against excessive inwardness may seem to point Batchelor towards a more "engaged" position, he shifts rather towards an aesthetic or even pantheistic perspective:

> Instead of imagining a dharma that erects even firmer barriers around the alienated self, let us imagine one that works toward a re-enchantment of the world. Doing so will require the cultivation of a sensibility to what might be called the "everyday sublime." (Batchelor, 2015, p. 17)

We will return to this idea of Buddhism as a *cultivation of sensibility* later on. For now, I would like to highlight Batchelor's attempt to carve out a "middle way" (to invoke a classical Buddhist trope) between the kind of religiosity that is rooted in dogmatic faith and the sort of unreflective atheism—"materialism"?—that denies not only the possibility of God and the realm of transcendence, but with it all that is not logical or subject to empirical

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[2] Cupitt's best-known work, *After God* (1997), describes the gradual but inevitable demise of "theistic" religions in favour of naturalism. Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) provides a detailed and evocative reinterpretation of "secularism" as a (largely) positive post-Enlightenment trend towards a plurality of spiritual options.

verification, including, importantly, the feeling of humility and awe in the face of nature. "Secular" is clearly not simply a synonym for "non-religious."

Betraying his modernist assumptions, Batchelor seeks an essence (and justification) for secular Buddhism in the early texts, arguing for the presence of an unmistakably "skeptical voice" in the Pāli Canon, one that

> refuses to be drawn into affirming or negating an opinion, into making ontological assertions, or into asserting anything as ultimately true or real. The sage chooses to suspend judgment rather than get involved in disputes […]. The point is to gain practical knowledge that leads to changes in behavior that affect the quality of your life: theoretical knowledge, in contrast, may have little, if any, impact on how you live in the world from day to day. (Batchelor, 2015, p. 22)

Beyond the appeal to an "ideality of origins," here we see Batchelor make an explicit connection between secular Buddhism and what we might call a "realist" or even "pragmatist" approach to knowledge.[3] He goes on to cite Trevor Ling's observation that "what we now know as Buddhism started life as an embryonic civilization or culture that mutated into an organized religion"—seeing this as an insight on which to construct a modern, secular Buddhism (Batchelor, 2015, p. 28). Later in the book, it becomes clear that what Batchelor means to suggest here is that Buddhism was (and can be) a *comprehensive* way of being in the world, unrestricted by the limits of "religion" as conceived in the contexts of (Western) modernity, as well as by more traditional criteria of family, status, and so on (Batchelor, 2015, p. 48). So this is, one might say, a vision of post-Enlightenment humanist universalism combined with a Romantic rejection of the lines between religion and the secular realms. Here, "secular" comes into clearer focus as a kind of "this-worldly" attention to the ordinary world, including both nature and social existence.

One of Batchelor's most insightful suggestions—and one that draws his work into conversation with the Critical Buddhist movement, addressed below—is his discussion of the "critical" aspect of Buddhist teachings, which

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[3] "Gotama is concerned with how a person can flourish within the totality of his or her sensorium, which he calls 'the all.' As a pragmatist, he has no interest in claiming that 'nothing exists outside of experience' or insisting that 'God does not exist.' These are metaphysical claims, just as indefensible as the metaphysical claims of his opponents. To adopt an atheist position would lay him open to exactly the same charges he makes against those he criticizes. Instead of making a statement about the existence or otherwise of a transcendent consciousness or Divinity, Gotama says that claims to know what is unknowable and see what is unseeable are nonsensical and entirely irrelevant to the task at hand of practicing the dharma" (Batchelor, 2015, p. 179).

he introduces by suggesting that what makes following the Buddhadharma so difficult for most people is that it "goes against the stream" (Pāli *paṭisotagāmi*) (Batchelor, 2015, p. 45). For Batchelor,

> to enter the stream of the eightfold path means to go against the stream of one's reactivity, be that of one's instinctual drives, social conditioning, or psychological inclinations. By choosing to think, speak, and act otherwise than as prompted by those habits requires considerable resolve and commitment. (Batchelor, 2015, p. 45)

Nirvana then becomes an "opening of a space" for true freedom, as one moves beyond inclinations, conditioning, and "reactivity" (Batchelor, 2015, p. 60).[4] Notice here how Batchelor frames his argument along lines that are readily familiar, not only to traditional orthodox religionists (i.e., religious transformation as a breaking out of conventional modes and habits into a "new life"), but also to secular liberals of the Kantian persuasion: freedom and salvation are premised on breaking away from our "natural" state; having the courage and aspiration to transcend the limitations of our "ordinary" (i.e., "unenlightened") ways of being. Batchelor goes on to render this process in more resolutely anti-Darwinian terms:

> Mythically, this force is described as the "army of Mara," which is composed of "sensual desire; discontent; hunger and thirst; craving; sloth and torpor; fear; doubt; hypocrisy and obstinacy; gain, renown, honour and ill-gotten fame; and the extolling of oneself and disparaging of others." Today we would understand these forces as part of the legacy of biological evolution, the embedded instincts and drives that enabled our ancestors to succeed in the competition for scarce resources and survive. (Batchelor, 2015, p. 63)

At first glance, this sounds plausible, but by associating all of these negative traits with "the legacy of biological evolution," Batchelor may here be replacing one set of "myths" with another. Yes, human beings need to eat, and surely there are evolutionary aspects to common responses (e.g., fight or flight) when faced with threatening situations. But sloth? Hypocrisy? Honour? The desire for fame? Selfishness? To assume that these are somehow "instinctual"—even as a foundation for criticism—seems to me to give up the game to the discourse of contemporary neo-liberal "realism" and associated neo-Freudian psychology, buttressed by Hobbesian assumptions about human nature and lingering Christian–Idealist suspicions about all things carnal. What if the "three fires" of greed, hatred, and delusion (or "confusion") are partly or wholly a product of social and economic

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[4] By "reactivity," Batchelor means *taṇhā* (Skt. *tṛṣṇā*), usually translated as "desire" or "craving" (p. 74).

(ideological) conditioning? Would that make a difference to Batchelor's Gospel of Secular Buddhism?[5] While Batchelor elsewhere alludes to the inescapable nature of social conditioning (Batchelor, 2015, pp. 293–294), towards the end of the book, he reiterates his conviction that contemporary secular Buddhism can and must resist our evolutionary heritage:

> From the perspective of modern biology, greed and hatred are a legacy of our evolutionary past. They are physical drives rooted in our limbic system, which still possess such potency because of the exceptional survival advantages the drives conferred on humans as a species. (Batchelor, 2015, p. 208)

There is much of value here, but there are also, I suggest, problems with Batchelor's project. Perhaps there are inevitable tensions between a "sceptical" and a "secular" Buddhism—while Batchelor employs both terms, he relies more heavily on the latter as a descriptor of his project for Buddhist reform (even though, as noted above, his understanding of the "secular" is nuanced in an interesting and fruitful way). Can a truly "sceptical" Buddhism keep to the ethical—some would argue *political*—imperative of the Buddhist path; namely, the commitment to the liberation of all beings from suffering? Near the end of the book, Batchelor hints at a broader, more explicitly political vision of Buddhist practice when he stipulates that *dukkha* is not simply an outflow of the greed and hatred that emerge from our "habitual reactivity," but rather "whatever impedes human flourishing […] [such as] a patriarchal culture, a despotic government, an oppressive religion, grinding poverty: these can prevent our flourishing just as effectively as our own greed and hatred" (Batchelor, 2015, p. 310). This brings him closer to the arguments of Critical Buddhism, to which I shall now turn.

Critical Buddhism: "Buddhism is Criticism"

Like Stephen Batchelor, Matsumoto Shirō 松本史郎 and Hakamaya Noriaki 袴谷憲明, the primary figures behind the late 20th-century Japanese scholarly movement known as Critical Buddhism (*hihan bukkyō* 批判仏教),

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[5] To flesh out my critique a little more, it seems odd to me that Batchelor explains reactions such as restlessness, boredom, guilt, self-doubt, vanity, inadequacy, anxiety, conceit, paranoia, expectation, and wishful thinking as "simply what happens when an organism interacts with its environment." I beg to differ—most if not all of these ways of responding to a situation are affected if not determined by one's upbringing, education, culture, religion, hegemonic ideologies, and so on. It seems a stretch to conclude, as Batchelor does, that they simply "are what *arises*" (Batchelor, 2015, p. 75).

recognized serious problems with the way Buddhism has been both understood and practised in the modern period, if not before.[6] They argued that: a) the early Buddhist tradition was established on premises that can be considered rational, sceptical, and broadly humanistic in their ethical force; b) over time, due to various factors, these "critical" aspects had withered if not disappeared in most branches of the Asian Buddhist tradition, but particularly the Chan and Zen traditions of East Asia; c) as a result, contemporary Asian Buddhism—and particularly Japanese Buddhism—was in need of a "critical" reformation, which might be brought about through a combination of textual scholarship and comparative analysis, utilizing critical resources from Western thought traditions such as the work of René Descartes—that most unlikely of Buddhists. More specifically, the Critical Buddhists founded their arguments on a clear distinction between ways of thinking and valuing they called *critical* and those they referred to as *topical*, contrasting terms associated with the methodological analysis of Descartes on the one hand and his presumed foil and foe, the Italian thinker Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), on the other.

So, if Buddhism must be critical, then what, exactly, does it mean to be critical, or to practice—and embody—*criticism*? For Hakamaya, being critical implies, first and foremost, the ability and willingness (perhaps, to invoke Kant again, *courage*) to make clear distinctions. He argues that it is in fact only critical thinking that can combat worldly discrimination (in the socio-political sense), which results precisely from a lack of logical/ethical discrimination, often in the name of some greater unity or harmony (e.g., racism, ethno-chauvinism, religious exclusivism, nationalism). Topicalism, a Latinate term back-translated by Matsumoto into Sanskrit as *dhātu-vāda*—implying something like the "way of locus," or simply, essentialism—stands as the *bête noire* of Critical Buddhism. Defined by Matsumoto as "a substantialist monism in which the Buddha-nature is the sole foundational reality out of which apparent reality is produced" (Matsumoto, 1997, p. 171) and by Jamie Hubbard as "an aesthetic mysticism unconcerned with critical differentiation between truth and falsity and not in need of rational demonstration" (Hubbard, 1997, p. vii), topicalism is a way of thinking about Buddhism, scholarship, religion, and, one might add, life more generally which is based on the notion of "a singular, real locus (*dhātu*) that gives rise

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[6] See Shields (2011).

to a plurality of phenomena […] a 'generative monism' or a 'transcendental realism'" (Matsumoto, 1997, p. 171).

It is important to note here that Critical Buddhism is not understood by Hakamaya and Matsumoto as merely Cartesian rationalism or Enlightenment humanism in Buddhist guise, but is rather as being ostensibly founded on certain inviolable Buddhist doctrines or principles against which everything else—even other doctrines and forms of belief held sacrosanct in some Buddhist quarters—must be judged. Thus, while heavily indebted to rationalist (and, to some extent, pragmatist) philosophical methods, criticalism is founded on (Buddhist) *faith*, where faith is not to be understood as "the unity of the object of belief and believer," but rather as believing in— *holding true and abiding by*—certain key doctrines such as *pratītya-samutpāda* (dependent origination), while using one's intellect and language to judge and elaborate the meaning and practical application of these principles in relation to nature and contemporary social forms. Thus, as with Descartes, there is a limited form of scepticism at work, but one that is always secondary to the primary, ethical *telos* of Buddhist practice.

Along these lines, the proper question to ask from the perspective of Critical Buddhism is not "What is Buddhism?" but rather "What is the *purpose* of Buddhism?" Hakamaya, in his attack on so-called topical thinking, criticizes the notion that *satori* or awakening is the goal of Buddhism; rather, he argues, the goal is *dharma-pravicaya*—"the clear discrimination of phenomena" (Hakamaya, 1997, p. 74). But even this is not really the end or *telos* of Critical Buddhism; it is rather the mode or method of it. The *goal* of Critical Buddhism is instead "the realization of 'wisdom' (*bodhi*) for the practice of 'great compassion' (*mahākaruṇā*)" (Yamaguchi Zuiho, quoted in Hubbard, 1997, p. xvi). Here, we shift from a primarily ontological or objective inquiry to a more explicitly constructive, ethical, soteriological, or perhaps even theological one. Again, as with the Cartesian project of radical doubt, here scepticism must give way to a measure of certainty, in order to give teeth to criticism as a firm basis for ethics.

Radical Buddhism

While intrigued by the forthright tone of the Critical Buddhists Matsumoto Shirō and Hakamaya Noriaki, and by their insistence that Buddhism was, or rather *should be*, founded on premises that are rational, sceptical, and broadly humanistic, in my 2011 book *Critical Buddhism*, I was critical of what I saw as the often uncritical liberalism of the Critical Buddhist perspective. This

concern led me to my next project on precedents for thinking about and practising Buddhism in conversation with more explicitly political—progressive, even radical—forms of thought in the Japanese tradition.[7] In *Against Harmony: Progressive and Radical Buddhism in Modern Japan*, I provided an intellectual genealogy and analysis of progressive and radical Buddhism in Japan since the Meiji Restoration of 1868, with particular focus on the first three decades of the 20th century, during which Japan saw the growth of nationalism and imperialism, both in discourse and practice.[8]

Despite the variations in the "New Buddhist" movements arising in Japan in the mid to late Meiji period (1868–1912), there was a general consensus that a) Buddhist institutions had lost their way and needed to be replaced or supplemented by a vigorous "lay Buddhism"; b) Buddhism was and had to re-establish itself as "this-worldly" (*genseshugi* 現世主義);[9] and c) Buddhism was and should be engaged with social, economic, and political issues—particularly when social, economic, and political systems were the primary cause of much modern "suffering." That said, like their Critical Buddhist descendants, most of these New Buddhists remained politically within the realm of progressive liberalism or social democracy; that is, they were convinced that modern democratic principles and structures were a necessary if not sufficient foundation for the New Buddhism they sought to

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[7] Batchelor, after noting that "the shift to a more secular approach to Buddhism is not new," provides three specific examples of similar attempts emerging out of modernity: the Vipassana movement, with roots in Burma, Chögyam Trungpa's Shambala Buddhism, and Soka Gakkai International. He criticizes all three of these "secularized Buddhist movements" for not being "radical" enough: "Although there may be a reduced public display of overt religiosity in their centers and a deliberate effort by teachers to present the dharma in terms of its psychological and social benefits, little effort has been made to critically examine the underlying worldview of Buddhism, in which are still embedded the cosmology and metaphysics of ancient India"—for example, "doctrines of karma, rebirth, heavens, hells, and supernormal powers" (Batchelor, 2015, p. 19). Here, Batchelor shows himself woefully oblivious to critical—even radical—precedents to his secular Buddhism in places such as China and (especially) Japan, some of which went far beyond his rather tame, dare I say "bourgeois" (if "progressive"), project.

[8] See Shields (2017).

[9] Batchelor on Buddhism and "this-worldliness": "Dharma practice takes place within this domain (*visaya*), which is the realm of human experience, a world intimately tied to the body and the senses. 'It is just in this fathom-high mortal frame endowed with perception and mind,' says Gotama, 'that I make known the world' […]. *Loka*, for him, does not refer to the world out there that I observe and hear about as a detached spectator but is shorthand for *whatever goes on*. The world is whatever 'collapses,' 'falls apart,' or simply 'passes.' […] It refers as much to thoughts and feelings that rise up and pass away as to events occurring outside the body" (Batchelor, 2015, p. 179).

establish. And yet, contacts with secular anarchists and Christian socialists led some of these New Buddhists into more radical terrain, leading to the emergence of groups such as the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism (Shinkō Bukkyō Seinen Dōmei 新興仏教青年同盟), a Marxist–Buddhist organization that flourished in the early 1930s before being forcibly suppressed in 1936.

One of the more striking elements of New Buddhism was a general lack of concern with metaphysics, cosmology, and even doctrine. Although many of those involved were scholars or scholar-priests—mainly associated with the Jōdo Shin 浄土真 (True Pure Land) and Nichiren 日蓮 sects—they did not spend much time justifying or arguing for their New Buddhism on philosophical, textual, or doctrinal grounds. Partly, this comes from the commitment to "this-worldliness," which supported a pragmatic, and, I suggest, "phenomenological" understanding of Buddhist truth. But it also emerges from an encounter with pantheist/immanentist and materialist thought traditions, culminating in the work of Marx and Russian anarchists such as Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876) and Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921). I have written about the problems and possibilities of Buddhist materialism elsewhere, but will simply point out here that scepticism and materialism have obvious points of contact; not least the radical critique of claims to transcendence, whether religious or philosophical. In the West, this goes all the way back to Epicurus (341–270 BCE), but also can be seen in the Cārvāka school of ancient India.[10]

Here, let me cite Matthew Stewart's summary of Epicurus's thought, which, I believe, transposes perfectly—however surprisingly—onto the work of the Japanese New Buddhists:

> Happiness in this life […] is everything. The highest form of happiness is freedom from pain in the body and tranquility of mind. The surest path to happiness is a life of ordinary virtue. The greatest sources of needless unhappiness are the misunderstandings that give rise to unquenchable desires and baseless fears. The worst of our misunderstandings involve the fear of inscrutable deities and the fear of death. Religion exploits these fears for the benefit of priests and kings. Calm attention to the true nature of things allows us to cast aside harmful fears and superstitions and thereby to achieve happiness. Science—by which is meant the quiet pursuit of the understanding

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[10] The term "Lokāyata" denotes a form of philosophical materialism that appears as a foil in early Buddhist texts, though scholars maintain that the Lokāyata or Cārvāka school did not emerge until the sixth and seventh centuries CE. The best-known figure associated with Cārvāka thought is the legendary Bṛhaspati, who appears to have taught a mix of scepticism and materialism.

> that brings happiness—is the only form of piety worth the name. (Stewart, 2014, p. 87)

Indeed, the guiding principle of the Epicurean tradition can be found in Lucretius's assertion that "nothing is ever produced supernaturally out of nothing" (Lucretius, 1951, I. 82–83), and that nothing, in turn, is ever completely destroyed. As with classical Buddhism in all its forms, in the Epicurean universe, "there is change—indeed, things never cease coming to be and perishing—but all change is transformation" (Stewart, 2014, p. 88). Thus, the foundation for this Epicurean, materialist form of scepticism is an acceptance of the "truth" of ceaseless change, as well as a commitment to "science" understood as a recognition and use of principles of naturalistic causality. But where is the political element to this? Indeed, Epicureans—as with their rivals, the Stoics, and sceptics of the Pyrrhonian sort—are often considered to be apolitical. Here, though, I suggest that the rejection of "politics" one finds in these classical Western schools is similar to their rejections of "religion"; that is, it is fundamentally a criticism of *unreflective*, *dogmatic* forms of political and religious belief and practices. In particular, when it comes to politics as normally understood, the sceptic would have serious doubts, as she should, about the effectiveness of both "the institution of government and the use of coercion as a social tool" (Fagin, 1997, p. 41). It may be that we are confronted here with a different conception of "politics," one that aligns with some of the ideas of the contemporary progressive thinker Murray Bookchin, who argues that politics has its origins in local communities rather than the large administrative bodies and top-down hierarchies we associate with the modern (or ancient) "state."[11]

Let us return to the issue of pragmatism. For Epicurus and Lucretius, as for Pyrrho and other classical sceptics,

> philosophy was first and foremost a practice. It was only by applying such ideas in one's life that their value was realized. The aim was not intellectual knowledge but a radical transformation of one's entire outlook on oneself and the world. (Batchelor, 2015, p. 254)

This, of course, is also at the very core of the religious impulse. And yet, for Pyrrho, at least, since things are

> equally in-different, un-measurable and un-decidable […] neither our sensations nor our opinions tell us truths or falsehoods. Therefore, we should not put the slightest trust in them, but be without judgement, without preference, and unwavering, saying about each thing that it no more is than is

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[11] See, for example, Bookchin (2015, p. 11).

not, or both is and is not, or neither is or is not. The result for those who adopt this attitude […] will first be speechlessness (*aphatos*), then untroubledness (*ataraxia*). (Batchelor, 2015, p. 254)

Though Batchelor tries to draw links between Pyrrhonian scepticism and the Buddha (even suggesting a direct influence via Anaxarchus, a mentor of Alexander the Great) (Batchelor, 2015, p. 330), the New (and especially radical) Buddhists edge more closely towards direct engagement with the causes of suffering than "untroubledness"—taking seriously, once again, the developments of 19th-century radical thought as it emerged from materialist and other traditions. The concern here is that "untroubledness" may be rooted in a too-ready acceptance of "conventional" modes of awareness and understanding—a conforming to "common sense" that is in fact delusory and/or ideologically constructed.

Buddhist Phenomenology

Here, Jay Garfield's work elaborating the "phenomenological" aspects of Mahāyāna—and particularly Madhyamaka thought—is of use. This is how Garfield sums up Buddhist pragmatic conventionalism:

Phenomena thus depend upon conceptual imputation—a dependence with social, cognitive and sensory dimensions. This may be one of the most radical attacks on one aspect of the Myth of the Given to have ever been advanced in world philosophy. It is not simply an argument that reality—whatever it may be—is not given to us as it is; rather, it is the claim that we can make no sense whatsoever of the very notion of reality that is presupposed by any form of that myth. The dependence, however, is not absolute, and does not yield an idealism; it is rather causal, involving an interplay between the subjective and objective aspects of the reality we enact. (Garfield, 2015, p. 35)

At this point, Garfield asks: Is this still *metaphysics*, or is it *phenomenology*; that is, investigating *the world as we know it* rather than *the world as it is*? He suggests that the Madhyamakan stance points to a phenomenological perspective that sets aside ontology, and thus metaphysics, entirely. Though this seems to align with certain features of the principle Western sceptical traditions (both Pyrrhonian and Academic), which resisted to varying degrees making statements about the world *as it is*, it differs from these in the following ways:

In providing an account of the world, the ontology of which is determined by imputation, Buddhist philosophers, partly for soteriological reasons, partly for metaphysical reasons, are emphasizing that the entities and properties with which we interact are those that have significance for us, those about which we care, that stand out from and are framed by backgrounds, or that constitute

the backgrounds that give significance to that which stands out […] Buddhist philosophy […] is aimed at solving a particular problem, that of the omnipresence of suffering […]. The choice of the *lebenswelt* as the site of metaphysics is thus not a retreat from reality, but a focus on the reality that matters to us. Its metaphysics is the metaphysics that can make a difference. (Garfield, 2015, p. 39)

In short, "phenomenology is central to Buddhist thought, because in the end, Buddhism is about the transformation of the way we experience the world" (Garfield, 2015, p. 179). Again, it is hard to miss a strong resonance here with the line of Western thought that runs from Epicurus and Lucretius through Bruno, Spinoza, and Marx. The *lebenswelt* in this phenomenological turn is "a world in which conventions can be constituted"; it is a world that is inescapably social—and even *political*—all the way down.[12]

From a Buddhist perspective, the trick, of course, is to distinguish—or, as the Critical Buddhists would have it, "discriminate"—between those conventions that cause suffering and those that relieve it. One of the potential dangers of Buddhism—noted in particular by the Critical Buddhists, but also by New Buddhists of an earlier era—is the tendency to promote "harmony" with the status quo: economic, cultural, political, cosmological, or even metaphysical. This is where the sceptical aspect of phenomenology comes into focus.

Arguing against Mark Siderits that the Mādhyamika are not, in fact, "anti-realists" but rather that they extend anti-realism to such a degree that it explodes the very premise on which it (and by extension, "realism") rests, Garfield concludes that

like his rough contemporary Sextus Empiricus, Nāgārjuna navigates between the extremes of the realism/anti-realism dichotomy by suspending the debate at issue; and by doing so he rejects the very presuppositions of the debate—that to be real is to be ultimately real, to have *svabhāva*. […] To be real on this understanding is hence not to *possess*, but to *lack*, *ultimate reality*. (Garfield, 2015, p. 65)[13]

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[12] "For this reason, from a Mahāyāna perspective, not only are our salient social practices and linguistic meanings conventionally constituted, but so too is our ontology" (Garfield, 2015, p. 39).

[13] Thus, as Garfield points out, whereas the Abhidharma might see the Madhyamaka as nihilistic in its denial of *svabhāva* to everything, from the Madhyamaka point of view, it is the Abhidharma that is nihilistic in the way it seems to deny or undercut the "reality" of the conventional world (in the way, perhaps, of some forms of scientific reductionism). Indeed, the Madhyamaka sees itself as offering a middle path between such nihilism and the more ordinary "common sense" reification.

Although phenomenology directly points to lived experience—and thus aligns with a naturalistic and even materialistic perspective—it also allows for a sustained critique of the "natural attitude," characterized by "a kind of unreflecting 'positing' of the world as something existing 'out there' more or less independently of us" (Evan Thompson, cited in Garfield, 2015, p. 175). Thus, like Buddhism at its best, phenomenology is rooted in a sceptical, and deeply critical, approach to the world and self. But also, like Buddhism at its best, the phenomenological method ideally goes beyond mere "introspection"—since introspection may be just as deluded as external observation via the senses (Garfield, 2015, pp. 177–178).

Conclusion

While there is clearly more work to be done, in this chapter, I have raised some intriguing possibilities that emerge from bringing Buddhist thought into conversation not only with classical Western scepticism, but also with modern and contemporary forms of progressive and radical philosophy—particularly those emerging out of the materialist, Epicurean, Marxist, and anarchist streams. Epicurus, like Spinoza and Marx, for that matter, is much better described as a proponent of *radical immanence* than as a "materialist." By this, I mean that they preferred to move *away* from metaphysics altogether rather than to oppose one set of ontological assumptions (idealism) with another (which is what "materialism" ostensibly does). At the same time, the "immanentist" line of thought eschews the sort of "weak nihilism" that might emerge from a scepticism that refuses to "take sides" on an issue. In a move that at least superficially resembles that of the existentialists, the very lack of a firm ontological ground is a call to greater *responsibility*—a push towards rather than away from the "meaningless" world. While Pyrrhonian scepticism may seem correlative with classical Buddhism, as well as the "secular" Buddhism promoted by modernists such as Batchelor, it is actually the residual scepticism of the Epicurean tradition that provides a better match with at least a progressively inclined contemporary Buddhism. This sort of scepticism requires a measure of "faith" in specific moral (and even political) claims about the value of human flourishing, the inevitability of change—but also the possibility of transformation—while also remaining mindful of the deleterious affects of much of what passes for "common sense" realism. As Wittgenstein would have it, "if I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put" (Wittgenstein, 1969/1972, §343).

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