

## CONSTRUCTIVE-ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE

### **CLASSICAL INDIAN SKEPTICISM: REFORMING OR REJECTING PHILOSOPHY**

JENNIFER NAGEL

One of the most striking features of Classical Indian skepticism is the degree to which it provides intellectual delight. Ethan Mills offers an insightful treatment of each of the three pivotal figures he locates in this tradition, but he also succeeds in conveying that sense of delight, both in his sympathetic depictions of the tradition's great skeptical arguments, and in his own creative interpretations of their significance. There are many points where I find Mills fully persuasive: for example, in his arguments to the effect that we cannot know the precise boundaries of our ignorance, and in his suggestion that skepticism can arise inevitably from an exaggerated emphasis on explicit justification. As a critic, however, I sense a duty to explore the more puzzling aspects of Mills' approach, with the aim of clearing away some ambiguities and gaining a deeper appreciation of what it is that he is proposing. I should acknowledge that I come at the book from an odd angle, as a contemporary epistemologist with no more than an amateur's grasp of the South Asian texts he is discussing. But in saying I read these texts as a contemporary epistemologist, I don't mean to say that I aim to impose my contemporary epistemology upon them, as opposed to letting it be shaped and instructed by them. I certainly agree with Mills that we should not assume that the moves made by Classical Indian skeptics can be neatly captured with the existing vocabulary of contemporary Anglo-American epistemology; indeed, much of the reward for me in looking at these traditions lies in their potential to offer fresh philosophical paths, and correctives to bad habits I have picked up from the traditions in which I was educated, and Mills' book has been eye-opening in that regard.

At the heart of the book is a distinction between epistemological skepticism and skepticism about philosophy, motivating the project of reading the three pillars as strictly committed to the latter enterprise. In Mills' framing of the contrast, epistemological skeptics have an agenda which may include advancing arguments

---

NAGEL, JENNIFER: Professor of Philosophy, University of Toronto, Canada. Email: [jennifer.nagel@utoronto.ca](mailto:jennifer.nagel@utoronto.ca)

with conclusions which are “truth claims about knowledge, particularly whether and to what extent humans possess knowledge in general or in particular domains”; these claims are situated within properly philosophical theories about knowledge, and are aimed at the promotion of doubt or suspension of judgment as the normatively correct epistemic response on ordinary matters (see Mills 2018, xxiii). By contrast, his skeptics about philosophy take philosophy itself as a target, jousting against various specific philosophical theories without the ambition of establishing a positive rival theory of their own. In particular, they are not committed to any theory of knowledge, and their aims are better characterized as therapeutic than as doctrinal. This therapy is intended to extinguish our desire to form beliefs about philosophical matters, although, intriguingly enough, the therapy proceeds through the provision of abundant philosophical arguments, albeit arguments which do not establish philosophical conclusions, (see Mills 2018, xxvii). Mills is attracted to the notion that his three pillars are fighting against philosophy, rather than everyday practice: he does not see them as advocating a purge of epistemic vocabulary from its role in our daily lives, nor as resisting common sense judgments about such mundane matters as whether someone has seen a given cup. I wonder both about his proposed separation between the mundane and the philosophical and about the suggestion that the three pillars are ultimately anti-philosophical, as opposed to being reformers who want to demonstrate the futility of certain philosophical programs, in a manner well suited to direct us into new ways of thinking that are still properly and positively philosophical.

Mills is not alone in thinking that there could be some theoretically important separation between mundane and philosophical contexts. In his discussion of Jayarāśi, Mills suggests that the semantic contextualism of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy also draws the kind of division that could be in play here, taking this program to be committed to a relevantly similar separation of contexts. His vision of the separation is as follows: “If one goes down the rabbit hole of epistemology, one will see that the whole enterprise of establishing *pramāṇas* is futile. If one avoids epistemology, then there is no problem at all—one can go on discussing knowledge in an everyday context. In the context of epistemology, epistemology self-destructs; in the context of everyday practice, there is no need for epistemology” (Mills 2018, 85-6). I will take issue with the thought that contextualism should be read this way, but I want to be clear from the outset that Mills is not saying that Jayarāśi was explicitly propounding a contextualist semantics. Mills holds that contextualism, understood his way, provides a helpful model that can be adapted to illuminate what is going on in Jayarāśi’s text; in particular, Mills wants to show that the negative claims that Jayarāśi makes in epistemological contexts should not bar him from continuing to use epistemic vocabulary in mundane contexts.

This line of thought is elaborated later in the book, when Mills urges us to understand the kind of skepticism he finds promising in the light of something he characterizes as a revision of semantic contextualism. He writes: “Unlike contextualists such as David Lewis (1999) or Stewart Cohen (2000), I don’t think we need to see the same proposition (e.g. “S knows that p”) as true in one context and false in another. Rather, I’d say that the difference is between two different kinds of

knowledge: we might have shallow knowledge that “S knows that p” while simultaneously lacking deep knowledge that “S knows that p.” When we progress from shallow knowledge to deep knowledge, we are doing more than changing context, we are changing the subject.” The upshot, according to Mills, is that, “We may have a great deal of what I call shallow knowledge, but deep knowledge is difficult, if not impossible, for human beings to possess. To put things more colloquially, we *kind of* know lots of things, but we don’t *really* know much of anything.” (Mills 2018, 180)

While Mills presents his change-of-subject approach as a correction to semantic contextualism, he may not be diverging from Lewis and Cohen as much as he thinks. First, although Cohen (2000) somewhat confusingly speaks of sentences rather than utterances, his contextualism does not hold that propositions about knowledge switch in truth value from one context to another: what changes is *what is said*, that is to say, *what proposition is expressed* in different contexts by an utterance of the form “S knows that p”. If a casual bystander says, “Smith knows that the flight stops in Chicago”, upon seeing Smith just glance at the itinerary, while Mary, for whom the Chicago layover is extremely important, says, “Smith does not know that the flight stops in Chicago,” then on Cohen’s theory the two speakers have not actually contradicted each other. The proposition that the casual bystander affirms is crucially different from the proposition that Mary denies. Because the casual bystander has a lower epistemic standards parameter than Mary does, the word “know” picks out a different property in the two contexts of attribution, although there are some commonalities in the property picked out by “know(s)” and its cognates across all contexts. The word always denotes a factive attitude, so the embedded proposition must be true (e.g. the flight must really stop in Chicago), and at least on Cohen’s theory, evidence is always required—so our subject Smith must have some evidence for p for *any* attribution of the form “Smith knows that p” to be true of him. What shifts between contexts of attribution is the amount of evidence needed, just as the absolute height needed to count as “tall” shifts when we are talking about “tall-for-a-basketball-player” versus “tall-for-a-jockey”. As in Mills’ own proposal of a switch between “shallow knowledge” and “deep knowledge”, there is something like a change of topic between speakers in different contexts: there are many things we know-by-low-standards and very few things we know-by-high-standards.

The point that different propositions are expressed in different contexts is initially harder to see in Lewis’s “Elusive Knowledge” (1996), which starts by suggesting that knowledge itself seems to melt away as we shift into epistemological reflection, but the body of Lewis’s text maintains a focus on the rules for the evaluation of knowledge ascriptions, and the concluding paragraphs acknowledge that strictly speaking the entire discussion ought to have been formulated in a meta-linguistic fashion, in terms of variable standards for the evaluation of utterances involving “know(s)”, rather than variable standards for knowledge itself. By way of an apology for his informal and technically inaccurate presentation, Lewis observes that this semantic ascent will be tedious to execute. However tedious it might be to spell it out, for the contextualists, there is strictly speaking no such thing as “knowledge itself”

full-stop, but only a broad family of relations between subjects and propositions, from the lax to the most stringent, denoted by our verb “to know” (and presumably its cognates and translations). So, Lewis would be on board with the spirit of Mills’ idea that “shallow knowledge” is easy and “deep knowledge” is hard. The point that different propositions are expressed by utterances of the form “S knows that p” becomes even clearer in more recent systematizations of contextualist theory, such as Keith DeRose’s (2009) *The Case for Contextualism*.

If the change-of-property point is a place where Mills is closer to contemporary contextualism than he realizes, there is another point where he is further away: he suggests that epistemology itself runs into trouble in high-standards contexts, and that one lesson of contextualism is that the philosopher should recognize that “the whole enterprise of establishing *pramāṇas* is futile”. This is an interesting suggestion. However, semantic contextualism on its own is a thesis about variability in the interpretation of epistemic vocabulary, and it is usually understood as leaving open the question of what theory of knowledge one might adopt. Lewis, Cohen and DeRose all advocate theories of knowledge. The *pramāṇas* they aim to establish are different: Lewis has an empiricist relevant alternatives theory, in which the contextually variable point is just the range of alternatives that must be excluded by one’s sensory experience and memories; Cohen has an internalist theory where context determines how much evidence is needed, and DeRose has an externalist tracking theory, where context fixes the range of possible worlds that will matter. For each, the definition or *kind* of condition that will properly be called “knowledge” remains fixed across all contexts (just as “tall” picks out “relatively great in vertical magnitude” in all contexts), but the ease of meeting this condition will vary (as “tall” does with the shifting implicit comparison class). In any event, contemporary contextualists will not agree that it is an upshot of their theory that, “in the context of epistemology, epistemology self-destructs”: for better or worse, they all offer positive theories of knowledge.

Now Mills may be right to suggest that contemporary contextualism still provides a model for the notion that “the project of establishing *pramāṇas*” is endangered in some contexts: in the most skeptical contexts, it may not be possible for a speaker to assert the positive epistemological theory that is supposed to apply to all contexts, and it is interesting in this context to remember that Śrī Harṣa’s opening exhortation specifically promises to teach techniques that will stop one’s adversaries from being able to set forth their positions in speech (Śrīharṣa, c.1100/1986, 3). However, each contextualist’s theory of knowledge is still supposed to be *true* in these contexts, and expressible from other positions (just as—to take an example of Lewis’s—it is sometimes true of us that we are now silent, although we are unable to speak truly in those contexts by saying out loud that we are being silent). Meanwhile, unless we are stuck talking to someone very well trained by Śrī Harṣa, talking about epistemology does not by itself switch us to the most skeptical contexts: epistemologists can for example, just focus on different things people might say in an airport, and try to make sense of the way we would expect them to use the common verb “to know”. If contemporary contextualists are right, the epistemological truths of any given context

cannot always be expressed in that context, but this is the sort of outcome we should already have recognized from the case of the silent person, a case which doesn't turn on epistemological issues. So, Mills' suggestion that "in the context of everyday practice, there is no need for epistemology" is quite contrary to the spirit of contemporary contextualism (see especially DeRose 2009, ch.2 on the extent to which contextualism is motivated by a desire to save and explain the empirical data of ordinary talk involving "know(s)" and its cognates). Whether contextualists really have satisfactory explanations of the daily use of "know(s)" is another issue, and one on which Śrī Harṣa may be able to contribute.

If the position that Mills attributes to his three pillars is out of line with contextualism, this is not necessarily a strike against Mills, nor against Classican Indian philosophy: perhaps it is the contemporary contextualists who should be worried. From here on, I'm going to focus on just one of the three pillars, Śrī Harṣa, because I think he's the one who creates the most trouble (and excitement). Even if I think contextualists like Lewis would balk at this result, Mills may well be right that Śrī Harṣa shows that their project of establishing *pramāṇas* really is futile. Where I am going to part company with Mills is on the point of whether epistemology should be equated with the project of "establishing *pramāṇas*": I think that Śrī Harṣa can be read as actually doing epistemology, and not as destroying epistemology, even as he burns down the project of giving a reductive analysis of knowledge.

First, a point of agreement with Mills: like him, I admire the intuitive cases that Śrī Harṣa deploys against various efforts to give reductive analyses of knowledge. I agree that the person who mistakes fog for smoke does not know that there is fire on the hill, and that the gambler does not know that there happen to be five shells in the closed fist, however confident and correct these subjects might be. I agree with Mills (and with Śrī Harṣa, if I am reading him correctly) that philosophers have not succeeded in repairing the analysis of knowledge by adding explicit conditions to exclude accidental correctness, and I think Śrī Harṣa does a good job of showing that various efforts to do this either run too wide (admitting as knowledge cases that clearly aren't) or drop into circularity, invoking the very notion they promised to explain. What did Śrī Harṣa mean to accomplish by running through this list of failed efforts to analyze knowledge, given that at the end he supplies no superior analysis of his own? One could read the progression in the text as a deliberate demonstration of the failure of the method of reductive analysis, and I think that Mills himself is on board with the idea that this method is going to fail, especially for targets like knowledge: he approvingly cites Williamson's pessimistic induction for the conclusion that we will not succeed in analysing 'knows' reductively, in terms that do not presuppose what we seek to define (Mills 2018, 173). I expect Mills and I both read Śrī Harṣa as delivering a heaping platter of inductive evidence for this pessimistic induction. We could also both emphasize Śrī Harṣa's open declarations of war on the analytic method, such as his cheerful provocation, "Let our opponent who imagines that he can define things come forward with his definitions. He will fail; for we shall at once point out objections to each definition he attempts." (Śrīharṣa, c.1100/1986, 40) One question is whether we can move from these denunciations and

demonstrations of failure of definitions to a broader skepticism about philosophy. After approving of Williamson's pessimistic induction argument for the prospects of analyzing knowledge, Mills goes on to say that he himself "would apply such a pessimistic induction to most other philosophical goals as well" (Mills 2018, 173). My own sense is that we could gain support for this blanket pessimism from a thinker like Śrī Harṣa only if we had an exaggerated sense of the importance of definitions in philosophy: I think we can accept Śrī Harṣa's attacks on reductive analyses without becoming more broadly pessimistic about philosophical goals. So my own inclination is to read Śrī Harṣa in a manner somewhat closer to Jonardon Ganeri's, although I don't know that I'd go all the way to Ganeri's view that "Śrī Harṣa is no skeptic" (Ganeri 2017, 522). In Ganeri's view, Śrī Harṣa mainly aims to deliver a strong methodological lesson with his negative arguments: his method of refutation is supposed to demonstrate that our concepts are fully usable without definitions or indeed without any grounding discoverable through definitions. This is an interesting and innovative new type of philosophy, not a form of skepticism about philosophy.

What *is* philosophy if it isn't a project of giving reductive definitions? We can go back to the case of knowledge. Śrī Harṣa is sometimes read as excluding not only reductive definitions, as Williamson does, but also excluding views in which the targets of philosophical interest are unanalyzable primitives. So Nilanjan Das, for example, reads Śrī Harṣa as excluding a view like Williamson's in his attack on the effort to define knowledge simply and non-reductively, as "that cognition which belongs to the class of *pramā*" (Śrīharṣa, c.1100/1986, 162) (as discussed in Das 2018, p.20). I find this passage in the *Buffet of Destruction* somewhat more ambiguous: it seems to me that Śrī Harṣa may be really objecting to the idea that we can construct a theory or recipe that experts can use to operationalize knowledge-spotting in some automatic or unproblematic way, as detection of the property of knowledge. It seems to me that Śrī Harṣa is leaving open and indeed directing attention to the possibility that there is some primitive and unanalyzable (or undefinable) phenomenon of knowledge itself; indeed, his arguments about the accuracy of our knowledge-spotting seem to suggest to me that he must accept this phenomenon, at some level. The arguments take it for granted that sometimes there really are (at some level) instances of knowledge that are mistakenly judged incorrectly (so knowledge is not automatically self-disclosing). But the qualification 'at some level' is important. Whether any such phenomena are ultimately real in Śrī Harṣa's eyes is I think a question about the depth of his skepticism, and a question which is very hard to answer. But to the extent that we take seriously his apparently positive philosophical pronouncements about the ultimately illusory character of the Universe, and especially his metaphysically ambitious positive remarks about Non-duality, it seems to me that we might want to read Śrī Harṣa as carving out a role for philosophy that isn't just a matter of therapeutically releasing ourselves from the philosophical desire to define.

I agree strongly with Mills' suggestion that Śrī Harṣa is warning us against the pursuit of definitional justifications, but I wonder about whether he thinks that such justifications are all that philosophy can ultimately pursue, condemned to fail in some

instructive or therapeutic way in that pursuit. Even if Śrī Harṣa's descriptive claims about awareness of ordinary contingent matters like the number of flowers on a branch are ultimately undercut by his skeptical reasoning about the illusory character of the universe, I want to find a way of understanding his attitude to philosophy that will make sense of his positive philosophical claims about non-duality, and above all, of the imperatives and exhortations in his text. I think Mills is right to see Śrī Harṣa as drawing a distinction between shallow and deep knowledge, but I think his version of shallow knowledge applies to what happens in time (or is subject to "production"), and is of what "lies within the sphere of illusion" (77), where deep knowledge concerns what is "essentially 'non-producible', *i.e.* eternal" (77), and non-dual, one with Brahman (77-8). I take this to be a form of skepticism quite interestingly different from what we find either in Ancient Greece or on the contemporary scene. And finally, I cannot help but hear Śrī Harṣa as a true believer in philosophy when he writes: "I, therefore, can only call upon you, however much you may hanker after the enticing glamour of illusion, to accept with due faith this Non-duality as it is set before you fully supported by arguments agreeing with your own principles of correct reasoning." (79) The passage goes on to counsel direct intuition of the Highest Reality, but I think philosophical argument is supposed to play a more than therapeutic role in getting us there.

In closing, however, I should acknowledge that whether someone is reforming or rejecting philosophy depends in part on what we mean by 'philosophy', so some aspect of this dispute may be merely verbal. Meanwhile, Mills and I are certainly in agreement that the larger enterprise that his three pillars are engaged in—whether it is pure philosophy, or some mixture of that and a form of therapy that makes use of but transcends philosophy—is a deeply intriguing one.

## REFERENCES

- Cohen, S. (2000), "Contextualism and Skepticism", *Philosophical Issues* 10: 94-107.
- Das, N. (2018), "Śrīharṣa", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/sriharsa/>>.
- DEROSE, K. (2009), *The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context* (Volume 1) (New York: Oxford University Press).
- Ganeri, J. (2017), "Śrī Harṣa's dissident epistemology: of knowledge as assurance", in Ganeri, J. (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Lewis, D. (1996), "Elusive Knowledge", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74: 549-567.
- Mills, E. (2018), *Three Pillars of Skepticism in Classical India* (Lanham: Lexington Books).
- Śrīharṣa (c.1100/1986), *The Khandanakhandakhadya of Shri-Harsa (The Sweets of Refutation)* (Delhi, Sri Satguru Publications).