



Universität Hamburg  
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Numata Zentrum  
für Buddhismuskunde

ספקנות

Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies  
JEWISH SCEPTICISM

WORKSHOP

# BUDDHISM AND SCEPTICISM: HISTORICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL, AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES



## Date

November 14–16, 2017

## Venue

Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies, Schlüterstraße 51 (Room 5060/5<sup>th</sup> Floor), 20146 Hamburg

## Abstract

From their earliest stages, Buddhist traditions have displayed a sceptical attitude towards various types of accepted knowledge. Buddhist thinkers, beginning from the historical Buddha, questioned metaphysical assumptions, the realistic view of the world, and the reliability of our sources of knowledge, and expressed doubt about common social norms and religious views. In this way, philosophical scepticism played a pivotal role in the way Buddhist thought evolved. It served both as a method for arriving at a reliable and liberating understanding of reality and, as some argue, as an aspect of spiritual practice.

The conference on Buddhism and Scepticism investigates the place of scepticism in the development of classical Buddhist thought from historical and philosophical perspectives. From a historical standpoint, the conference explores the development of sceptical strategies in Buddhism and their relation to non-Buddhist systems of thought in Europe and Asia. From a philosophical point of view, it explores the ways in which sceptical arguments are used in Buddhist philosophical works, and how they resemble, and differ from, sceptical methods in other, non-Buddhist philosophies.

## Convenor

Oren Hanner (Universität Hamburg)

**TUESDAY**

**NOVEMBER 14, 2017**

17:30

**Reception**

18:15 – 18:30

**Welcome Addresses and Greetings**

18:30 – 20:00

**Keynote: Some Sceptical Doubts about “Buddhist Scepticism”**

*Mark Siderits (Seoul National University)*

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**WEDNESDAY**

**NOVEMBER 15, 2017**

*Chair: Sergiu Spătan (Universität Hamburg)*

10:00 – 11:00

**Nāgārjuna's Scepticism about Philosophy**

*Ethan Mills (University of Tennessee at Chattanooga)*

11:00 – 12:00

**The Soteriology of Scepticism: Historical and Philosophical Readings on Pyrrhonism and Buddhism**

*Georgios T. Halkias (University of Hong Kong)*

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12:00 – 13:30

**Lunch**

*Chair: Felix Baritsch (Deutsche Buddhistische Union)*

13:30 – 14:30

**The Evident and the Non-Evident: Buddhism through the Lens of Pyrrhonism**

*Adrian Kuzminski (Independent Scholar)*

14:30 – 15:30

**Why Madhyamaka Philosophy Is Not Sceptical**

*Eli Franco (Universität Leipzig)*

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15:30 – 16:00

**Coffee Break**

16:00 – 17:00

**Ethics of Atomism and Scepticism**

*Amber Carpenter (Yale-NUS College)*

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19:00

**Dinner**

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THURSDAY

NOVEMBER 16, 2017

*Chair: Jowita Kramer (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)*

10:00 – 11:00

**The Epistemological Foundation of the Debate between the Samaniyya and the Early Mutakallimūn**

*Dong Xiuyuan (Shandong University)*

11:00 – 12:00

**Abandoning the Doubt through Doubting: *cintāmayī prajñā* in the \**Vajracchedikāṭikā* by Kamalaśīla**

*Serena Saccone (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften)*

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12:00 – 13:30

**Lunch**

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13:30 – 14:30

**Between Faith and Scepticism: Probabilism as a Philosophical Approach to Scripture in Dharmakīrti's Thought**

*Vincent Eltschinger (École pratique des hautes études)*

*Chair: Steffen Döll (Universität Hamburg)*

14:30 – 15:30

**Buddhist Variations on Axiological Scepticism and Ethical Pluralism**

*Gordon F. Davis (Carleton University)*

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15:30 – 16:00

**Coffee Break**

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16:00 – 17:00

**Sceptical Buddhism as Provenance and Project**

*James Mark Shields (Bucknell University)*

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19:00

**Dinner**

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## ABSTRACTS

### **Nāgārjuna's Scepticism about Philosophy**

*Ethan Mills (University of Tennessee at Chattanooga)*

I will defend a sceptical interpretation of the Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna (c. 150-200 CE) according to which he is sceptical about philosophical conceptualisation itself. This scepticism operates in two phases: in phase one, Nāgārjuna argues in favour of a philosophical thesis of emptiness, while in phase two, he demonstrates that emptiness undermines itself along with all other philosophical theses. This interpretation provides an answer to the fundamental question in Nāgārjuna interpretation: how can we reconcile his apparent endorsement of a thesis of emptiness with his claims to have no views or theses? Next, I will show how my interpretation makes sense of his critiques of theories about causation and the means of knowledge. Lastly, I will turn to historical issues: first, Nāgārjuna develops the quietist strands of Early Buddhism while incorporating elements of analysis-insight strands, and second, there are historical precedents for sceptical interpretations of Nāgārjuna in India, Tibet, and China. Inquiry into Nāgārjuna's historical and religious context shows that for him, Buddhism and scepticism are not merely compatible in the way that Sextus Empiricus claims Pyrrhonism is compatible with religious practice; Buddhist practice of at least one type actually constitutes a type of scepticism, a point that can contribute to larger conversations about scepticism and religious practice.

### **The Soteriology of Scepticism: Historical and Philosophical Readings on Pyrrhonism and Buddhism**

*Georgios T. Halkias (University of Hong Kong)*

The sceptical philosophy of Pyrrhon of Elis (c. 360 to c. 270 BCE) will be re-examined by focusing on the oldest testimony of his thought – the account of his disciple Timon of Phlius recorded by Aristocles of Messene and preserved in Eusebius of Caesarea – and on later sources. Scholars continue to question Aristocles' version because it diverges from an otherwise "consistent picture" of Pyrrho's views presented in later testimonies. It will be argued that seemingly incompatible interpretations may be resolved if we consider that Pyrrho was not a metaphysician, but was charting an epistemological and ethical way of life with a soteriological aim (Greek *ataraxia*) akin to the one endorsed in Buddhism. If this reading may seem to set Pyrrho apart from his philosophical milieu, cross-cultural influences are not entirely unwarranted when we consider that he (a) came into contact with Indian ascetics at the far eastern borders of the Persian Empire; (b) adopted an austere discipline back in Elis that resembled Indian asceticism; and (c) fraternised with the gymnosophist Kalanos who followed Alexandros (356-323 BCE) back to Persia and who is likely to have been a Buddhist (Halkias 2015). Although compatible elements between Buddhist and Pyrrhonian scepticism can be attributed to their historical meeting, sceptical traditions ought to be investigated from a wider Eurasian context. Arguments against beliefs, conventions, and sense perceptions for the realisation of truth and the attainment of higher knowledge were also held by pre-Socratic thinkers such as the Ephesian Heraclitus and Parmenides of Elea and his successors.

## **The Evident and the Non-Evident: Buddhism through the Lens of Pyrrhonism**

*Adrian Kuzminski (Independent Scholar)*

This paper aims to highlight some of the intriguing parallels between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism that I first explored in my work *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism*. My main focus will be on Pyrrhonism, the lesser known of the two traditions, and particularly on the key Pyrrhonist distinction between the evident and the non-evident. I will argue that Buddhism shares this basic distinction with Pyrrhonism and that it informs a number of other basic parallels between the traditions. Those parallels include the flux of appearances for the Pyrrhonists and dependent origination for the Buddhists; dogmatic beliefs about inherently non-evident things for the Pyrrhonists and clinging or attachments for the Buddhists; the Pyrrhonists' rejection of positive and negative dogmatism and the Buddhists' rejection of eternalists and annihilationists; the Pyrrhonists' open inquiry and the Buddhists' Middle Path; the Pyrrhonists' suspension of judgment and the Buddhists' "unanswered questions"; the Pyrrhonists' rejection of interpretation and the Buddhists' "emptiness"; and the Pyrrhonists' imperturbability or *ataraxia* and the Buddhists' enlightenment.

## **Why Madhyamaka Philosophy Is Not Sceptical**

*Eli Franco (Universität Leipzig)*

The Madhyamaka philosophical discourse sometimes seems to be akin to scepticism: for instance, in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, Nāgārjuna argues that no means of knowledge exist and that any attempt to establish them would lead to fallacies such as mutual dependence, infinite regress, and so on. In this paper, I will argue that the similarity between Madhyamaka and scepticism is superficial and that the labelling of Madhyamaka as scepticism is inappropriate both from the point of view of absolute reality and from that of conventional/empirical reality.

## **Ethics of Atomism and Scepticism**

*Amber Carpenter (Yale-NUS college)*

Democritus' atomism, as it has come down to us and as it was developed and disputed in the European tradition, is essentially a physical claim. It is, as Jonathan Barnes puts it, "a particulate theory of matter" and is intelligibly an ancestor of atomism in modern physics. It is metaphysical insofar as matter becomes mathematicised in Ancient Greece and its intellectual successors. But it is not true atomism. Abhidharma Buddhism, by contrast, developed a truly metaphysical atomism – a realist view in which only what is absolutely (logically and conceptually) indivisible is fundamentally real. The epistemologies supporting these different forms of atomism look similar at first, but in fact, while Democritus both presupposes bodies and is vulnerable to charges of (incomplete) scepticism, Abhidharma atomism as developed by Vasubandhu has neither feature. Because of the specific philosophical pressures and epistemological resources driving Vasubandhu's

atomism, he can offer a minimalist metaphysical picture that is not liable to sceptical critique – or rather, by placing any such scepticism squarely in its proper place, together with explanations for the unreality and apparent reality of non-atomistic phenomena, Vasubandhu can reserve an unchallenged place for realism while at the same time holding on to the aspects in which such a metaphysical picture is an edifying ethical practice. When Vasubandhu does critique this atomism, the criticism is not such as to give rise to global scepticism, but instead to idealism.

### **The Epistemological Foundation of the Debate between the Samaniyya and the Early Mutakallimūn**

*Dong Xiuyuan (Shandong University)*

It is generally accepted that the term *Samaniyya*, deriving from *Śramaṇa*, designates Buddhist thinkers in medieval Arabic literature. In Kalām works, there are reports of debates between some early Mutakallimūn and the Samaniyya. The views of the Samaniyya, who adopted a sceptical approach to the theistic doctrine, reflect the Buddhist theory on the criteria of knowledge (*pramāṇa*) and leave an indelible mark on the epistemology of Kalām. As for the transmission route, most of the evidence points to Balkh, the central city of Tokharistan, where the paths of the Sarvāstivādins, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, and the early Muslims crossed.

### **Abandoning the Doubt through Doubting: *cintāmayī prajñā* in the \**Vajracchedikāṭikā* by Kamalaśīla** *Serena Saccone (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften)*

Kamalaśīla (c. 740-795) was a Buddhist philosopher belonging to the late Indian Mahāyāna. Most of his works are Madhyamaka, even though his major and most famous work, the *Tattvasaṅgrahapañjikā*, has a predominant Vijñānavāda nature. Given the thematic character of those texts, Kamalaśīla can also be regarded as part of the so-called logico-epistemological school of thought, and he certainly defends and implements many of the doctrines and argumentations of Diṅnāga and Dharmakīrti, major exponents of that school. In his three *Bhāvanākramas* (*Gradual Progression of Realisation*), Kamalaśīla introduces and describes the cultivation of a special kind of insight, the insight born of reflection (*cintāmayī prajñā*). In particular, in the first *Bhāvanākrama*, he presents it as a way of generating correct knowledge which, in turn, involves a conceptual ascertainment of the real truth regarding things along with the removal of doubt. This doubt concerns what is ultimately true and it cannot be abandoned without insight, the antidote being a rational conviction of the absence of self (*nairātmya*) in all *dharmas*. The tool through which one attains this is, at the same time, doubt itself. As exemplified in many of his works, the process is one of progressive analysis and criticism of views which are accordingly ranked in terms of different levels of truth. Each of them is disproved in order to access a (subsequent) higher level, the final level being that of *nairātmya* of all *dharmas*. This process also involves a refinement of reason which culminates in the self-combustion of conceptuality itself. In this lecture, my goal is to provide an exemplification of this method of gradual refutation of doctrines as applied to the view that

external objects of cognitions truly exist. I shall particularly show this with regard to one virtually unstudied work by Kamalaśīla, the *\*Vajracchedikāṭīkā*, a commentary on the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā*, in which his goal is to prove how the perfections (*pāramitā*) must be practised without abiding in the belief of something which really exists (since nothing is as such), but rather with the full awareness of the absence of true nature in all *dharmas*.

### **Between Faith and Scepticism: Probabilism as a Philosophical Approach to Scripture in Dharmakīrti's Thought**

*Vincent Eltschinger (École pratique des hautes études)*

Pre-sixth-century Buddhist schools and intellectuals included authoritative scripture (*āptāgama*, etc.) in their list of the three to four means of valid cognition (*pramāṇa*). In scholastic argumentation, scripture was regarded as having the same jurisdiction as reason(ing) (*yukti*), thus equally contributing to exegesis and to the search for doctrinal/philosophical truth. It was only with Dignāga (480-540) and especially Dharmakīrti (c. 600?), in whose works the Buddhist scriptures play no argumentative role (at least partly due to the nature of their opponents), that the operation of scripture was problematised and its area of competence restricted to the supersensible realm (*atīndriya*). This epistemological limitation led Dharmakīrti and his successors to seriously downplay the reliability of scripture by denying it the status of a genuine means of valid cognition on the grounds that a given treatise's statements can be neither verified nor falsified by ordinary human beings and the "natural" operation of human cognition. But if, as Dharmakīrti himself says, human beings cannot live without resorting to the authority of a scriptural tradition, how can they maximise their chances of being successful in their practical activities – ethics, ritual, soteriology? Dharmakīrti's philosophy of authority provides an interesting attempt to trace a path between the requirements of human praxis and skepsis regarding the possibility for humans to access the supersensible realm.

### **Buddhist Variations on Axiological Scepticism and Ethical Pluralism**

*Gordon F. Davis (Carleton University)*

Some have argued that important sub-traditions in Mahāyāna philosophy, such as Madhyamaka, offer a perspective on ethics that is anti-realist about foundations or ultimate moral standards. Others argue that rival sub-traditions, such as Yogācāra, advance something more akin to moral realism. Philosophically, there are strong reasons for keeping an open mind about the latter; and doctrinally, it coheres with important elements in canonical sutras; but it does not rule out meta-ethical scepticism, which offers a third approach, though one that may be compatible with some forms of realism. Mahāyāna ethics, as a whole, may not be best interpreted as amounting to a meta-ethical scepticism, but localised forms of scepticism offer natural interpretations of the philosophical orientation underlying certain pluralist strands in both ancient and contemporary Mahāyāna ethics. One example of such localised scepticism can be applied to axiology, in particular the question of how different kinds of benefit are to be weighed against each other when those

resolving to 'benefit all sentient beings' have to face trade-offs, for instance of the kind envisaged in texts addressing *upāya* (skilful means).

### **Sceptical Buddhism as Provenance and Project**

*James Mark Shields (Bucknell University)*

In his 2015 publication *After Buddhism*, Stephen Batchelor makes a strong case for reviving what he calls a “secular Buddhism,” rooted in the “skeptical voice” of early Buddhism as found throughout the Pali 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....” (22). While sympathetic to Batchelor’s thesis – one that resonates with the subjects of my own scholarly work – this paper examines the links between “secular,” “critical,” “sceptical,” and “radical” Buddhism, in order to flesh out a genealogy as well as 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 ameliorate the suffering of sentient beings.