Is knowledge even possible?

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by Richard Hayes in the autumn of 2009

1. Introduction: types of skepticism

In Western philosophy, the term "skepticism" has been used to refer to a range of philosophical positions that have in common a questioning of the very possibility of having knowledge. The Greek word *skeptomai* (σκέπτομαι) from which the word "skeptical" comes means "to inquire, to investigate." It could, in principle, be applied to any kind of willingness to keep searching for new evidence or for new ways of looking at a problem, rather than closing off further investigation by claiming that a question has been definitively answered once and for all. In practice, however, it is a term applied to several particular types of inquiry, of which we shall look at two that may be seen as having counterparts in Buddhism.

1.1. Pyrrhonism

The term "philosophical skepticism" is associated with the thinking of Pyrrho (ca. 365–275 BCE), who left no writings but whose teachings are reported by others, including his disciple Timon. One account of his approach that survives is the following fragment from a writing of Aristocles (dates unknown):

> He [Pyrrho] himself has left nothing in writing, but this pupil Timon says that whoever wants to be happy must consider these three questions: first, how are things by nature? Secondly, what attitude should we adopt towards them? Thirdly, what will be the outcome for those who have such an attitude? According to Timon, Pyrrho declared that things are equally indifferent, unmeasurable and inarbitrable. For this reason neither our sensations nor our opinions tell us truths or falsehoods. Therefore for this reason we should not put our trust in them one bit, but should be unopinionated, uncommitted and unwavering, saying concerning each individual thing that it no more is than is not, or both is and is not, or neither is nor is not. The outcome for those who actually adopt this attitude, says Timon, will be first speechlessness [*aphasia*], and then freedom from disturbance; and Aenesidemus says pleasure. (Eusebius, *Prep. Ev.* 14.18.2–5, Long & Sedley)[1]

[1] Quoted in Leo Groarke, "Ancient Skepticism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2009/entries/skepticism-ancient/.

Followers of Pyrrho observed that much of the turmoil and unhappiness of human life arises from holding on rigidly to opinions. When others hold rigidly to opinions other than one's own, strife is likely to arise, and one is more inclined to see the other as unworthy of respect. This lack of respect can lead in turn to feeling justified in acting or speaking abusively toward the other. So the key to both a harmonious life and an ethical one, said the Pyrrhonians, is to abstain from speaking about opinions (*aphasia*), and the best way to avoid speaking about opinions is not to hold them in the first place.

1.2. Academic skepticism

Academic skepticism is associated with the Academy of Plato, and the Academic skeptics were those who drew upon the Platonic dialogues in which Socrates is presented as questioning everything. This portrait of Socrates appears most vividly in the text called "The Apology," in which he is portrayed as questioning the oracle at Delphi, which had proclaimed Socrates the wisest of all men. Socrates, of course, doubts the oracle and sets out to prove it wrong by finding someone wiser than himself. In that dialogue Socrates is portrayed as telling of his search for men known for their wisdom and learning. He meets such people, interviews them and discovers that they themselves do not really understand what they claim to know. He summarizes his search in these words:

> However, I reflected as I walked away, Well, I am certainly wiser than this man. It is only too likely that neither of us has any knowledge to boast of, but he thinks he knows something which he does not know, whereas I am quite conscious of my ignorance. At any rate, it seems that I am wiser than he is to this small extent, that I do not think that I know what I do not know.

Later Academics understood the Socratic method of inquiry as a technique for dealing with misfortune. Misfortune makes people miserable, because people tend to see situations only from one perspective, their own. If a person can learn to see a situation from other perspectives, then he can see that what is troubling to him might very well be a source of joy to others; one's own misfortune may be someone else's good fortune. Learning to see things from many points of view can therefore be an antidote to one of the most common sources of avoidable unhappiness.

More generally, seeing situations form the perspective of others enables one to see that there is not single perspective that is uniquely correct. One person's truth may be another's falsehood. What appears virtuous to one person may seem vicious to another. As with Pyrrhonian skeptics, the Academic skeptics observed that rigidity in opinion and narrowness in outlook were inclined to make a person internally unhappy and externally disharmonious with others.

2. Skeptical tendencies in early Buddhism

The goal of all practice in Indian Buddhism is the eradication of all the root causes of unhappiness and distress. In most accounts, the principal root cause of misery is ignorance or misconception (*avidyā*), sometimes also called delusion (*moha*). That in turn is said to arise from unprincipled thinking (*ayoniśo manaskāra*), that is, the failure to invesitage matters

throughly. This failure has as its natural consequence a painful superficiality in one's outlook. This superficiality or carelessness in thinking is responsible for unwarranted, unfounded views (*dṛṣṭi*).

Early Buddhist literature is filled with descriptions of the dangers of unfounded views. One example of such a text is the *Paramaṭṭhasutta* of the Suttanipāta.[2]

> 796. A person who persists in opinions regards as a waste everything other than that which, thinking "it is supreme," he regards as best in the world. Therefore he fails to get beyond disputes.
>
> 797. Then grasping at just that which he sees as commendable to himself in rules of conduct and vows and in what is seen, heard or thought, he regards everything else as a loss.
>
> 798. The experts call that a shackle owing to which one considers all else a waste. Therefore the monk should not pursue rules of conduct and vows and what is seen, heard or thought.

The message is clear enough. Human beings have a tendency to take their own experiences as the measure of all things. They trust their own experiences but are wary of what others have experience. People tend to trust their own reasoning but find flaws in the thinking of others. People think their own commitments and practices and vows are right not only for themselves but for all people. Taking themselves as the standard by which all others are to be judged, people tend to see others as deficient. Other people are seen as wasting their own time, and, insofar as one takes others seriously, they are also wasting one's own time. But letting oneself see others as unworthy of respect is a trap. It is, in the language of the text, a shackle. The text goes on to say:

> 799. Nor should he form an opinion of people either through knowledge or through rules of conduct and vows. Nor should be present himself as an equal, nor should he think of himself as inferior or superior.

Any form of judgement whatsoever is a trap, because it inevitably takes oneself as the standard of comparison and reinforces the habit of focussing on oneself. The antidote to that disease is simply to let experiences register themselves and then check out. The text goes on to say:

> 800. Giving up assumptions and not taking them up again, he does not pursue even knowledge. Indeed, he does not side with any party in controversies, nor does he believe any opinion whatsoever.

As with the Skeptics of ancient Greece, the Buddha advises against taking sides in disputes. He also recommends against the pursuit of knowledge, since this too can be a source of self-importance that leads to disparaging others who are less knowledgeable than oneself.

Also like the Skeptics,the Buddha observes that overconfidence in the soundness of one's own judgement is socially obnoxious. In another Aṭṭhavagga section of the Suttanipāta we find the Buddha summarizing his reflections in these words:

> 847. One who is free of judgements has no shackles. One who is set free by wisdom has no delusions. But those who take up judgements and opinions go about in the world being contentious.

[2] The following translation is my own and was first published in Richard P. Hayes, Dignāga on the Interpretation of Signs, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988), 43.

These texts we have considered so far look at the pursuit of knowledge from what he might call a perspective of aesthetics or etiquette. People who become too attached to knowledge behave in ugly an impolite ways. This does not suggest that knowledge is impossible, but that there is something unseemly about allowing oneself to become conceited and judgemental as a result of having knowledge. To find a more radical questioning of the very possibility of acquiring knowledge, we must turn to Nāgārjuna.

3. Nāgārjuna's *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (Quelling the dispute)

Nāgārjuna's *Vigrahavyāvartanī* was evidently written after he had written the *Mūla-madhyamaka-kārikā* or some text that established the emptiness of all things. It begins with a challenger saying that if all things are empty, then the statement that all things are empty must itself be empty, and if a statement is empty then it cannot communicate anything. On the other hand, the challenger goes on to argue, if the statement *does* communicate something, then it is not empty, and if the statement is not empty, then it is not the case that all things are empty. Nāgārjuna's response to this challenge is to explain that saying that a thing is empty is another way of saying that the thing is conditioned and dependent. Of course the statement that everything is conditioned and dependent is itself conditioned and dependent. How could it be otherwise? A statement must have someone who makes it, and it must have something to be a statement about, and it should have someone to whom it is addressed, and so on. That a statement is conditioned and dependent, says Nāgārjuna, in no way undermines its credibility.

The challenger poses several other possible objections to Nāgārjuna's position. One that is especially relevant to the topic of concern to us here is stated in these words:

> 17–20. And you have no proof based on a reason. Indeed you could not have a reason, because it would have no nature. And if your denial of a nature is established without a reason, then my affirmation of a nature is also established without a reason. And the affirmation that beings have no nature would be impossible, because no being lacking a nature exists in the world. Supposing the denial comes first and the object of denial comes next. That is impossible. And it is impossible that the denial comes later or at the same time [as the object of denial], since the nature [of these things] does not exist.[3]

Nāgārjuna's response to this challenge is long and complex. At the end of it he makes this observation:

> The means of acquiring knowledge are not established by themselves, nor are some of them produced by other means of acquiring knowledge, nor are they established through their objects of knowledge, nor are the established without any basis at all.

All claims that something is known, he is saying, depend in some way on a means of knowledge. To use more contemporary terminology, every proposition requires a warrant, a grounds for saying it. The standard warrants for a proposition are direct experience and reasoning. But the claim that direct experience warrants a proposition is itself a proposition. So what is the warrant of the proposition that direct experience warrants a proposition? There are two possible ways to respond to that question.

[3] This translation is my own. An edition of the Sanskrit text with a translation and study can be found in E. H. Johnston and Arnold Kunst, eds., *The Dialectical Method of Nāgārjuna: With Critical Edition of Nāgārjuna's Vigrahavyāvartanī*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978).

One response would be to say that the proposition that direct experience warrants a proposition is itself warranted either by direct experience or by reasoning. But now we have yet another proposition, and it is legitimate to ask what its warrant is. Attempting to respond in this way leads to an infinite regress; the search for an ultimate grounding for a proposition never ends.

The second possible response would be to say that the proposition that direct experience warrants a proposition is a self-warranted proposition. In other words, it is a proposition that does not *need* a warrant. But if this is true, then why could it not also be true that the *no* proposition requires a warrant? This would amount to saying that everything is automatically true just by being said. Every proposition and its negation would be equally true. Clearly this outcome is not satisfactory to anyone who is interested in trying to determine which propositions are true and which ones are false, which ones are warranted and which ones are not. And so this second possible response is also unacceptable.

Now if both of the possible responses to the question "What warrants our saying that direct experience warrants a proposition?" are inadequate, we are left with the conclusion that there is no warrant at all for this or any other proposition. The deep implication of this outcome is that none of what we take to be knowledge is really warranted or grounded. All our beliefs are nothing more than beliefs. None of them can be established. The anticipates the famous dictum of Nietzsche "There are no facts, only interpretations."

4. "Only don't know!"

In modern times there have been several Buddhists who have favored a skeptical approach to Buddhism. I suppose one of them would be myself, for I wrote a book of essays with the subtitle "Reflections of a sceptical Buddhist."[4] (I prefer the spelling "skeptical," but the British publishers preferred "sceptical," and I had no grounds to warrant my preference.) Two others who come to mind are the Korean Zen master Seung Sahn Sunim, who was famous for bellowing "Only don't know!", which was his invitation to stop claiming to know things, stop trying to be in control, stop interpreting all your experiences and just be with your experiences as they arise and pass away.[5]

Yet another modern Buddhist author whose works reflect a skeptical bent is Stephen Batchelor, although he prefers to think of himself as an agnostic. In several of his books he has posed provocative challenges to the standard doctrines associated with traditional

[4] Richard P. Hayes, Land of No Buddha: Reflections of a Sceptical Buddhist, (Birmingham, England: Windhorse Publications, 1998).
[5] This, of course, is my interpretation of his saying "Only don't know!" A worthwhile project might be to look at his book and arrive at one's own interpretation. See Stephen Mitchell, ed., *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha: The Teaching of Zen Master Seung Sahn*, (New York: Grove Press : distributed by Random House, 1976).

Buddhism and has invited his readers to ask themselves to what extent those doctrines are warranted.[6]

Today's question is: "Is knowledge even possible." My answer is: "I don't know."

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[6] Stephen Batchelor, The Faith to Doubt: Glimpses of Buddhist Uncertainty, (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1990); Stephen Batchelor, Buddhism Without Beliefs: A Contemporary Guide to Awakening, (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997).