

ANNUAL OF MEDIEVAL STUDIES AT CEU

VOL. 24 2018



Central European University
Department of Medieval Studies
Budapest



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Edited by
Gerhard Jaritz, Kyra Lyublyanovics, Ágnes Drosztmér



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Department of Medieval Studies

Central European University

H-1051 Budapest, Nádor u. 9., Hungary

Postal address: H-1245 Budapest 5, P.O. Box 1082

E-mail: medstud@ceu.edu Net: <http://medievalstudies.ceu.edu>

Copies can be ordered at the Department, and from the CEU Press

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Volumes of the Annual are available online at: <http://www.library.ceu.hu/ams/>

ISSN 1219-0616

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Produced by Archaeolingua Foundation & Publishing House

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THE SNAKE AND ROPE ANALOGY IN GREEK AND INDIAN PHILOSOPHY¹

Anna Aklan

Abstract

This article is concerned with the writings of Sextus Empiricus (second century CE), a Sceptic philosopher whose works show a remarkable plenitude of similar elements that occur frequently within various Indian philosophies. Following Aram M. Frenkian's investigation, this study re-examines one of the three elements identified by Frenkian as Indian influences on Sextus' *oeuvre*: the smoke-fire illustration, the snake-rope analogy, and the quadrilemma. The same elements, among others, were identified by Thomas McEvilley as evidence of Greek influence on Madhyamaka Buddhism. After inspecting the supposedly earliest occurrences in both Greek and Indian philosophy and literature, we must acknowledge, at least until other evidence arises, that these three elements are not indicators of direct borrowing. The presence of the same similes and verbal expression in both Indian and Greek philosophical contexts, however, is most probably an indicator of intellectual exchange, even if this is not due to direct influence out of textual contact but more likely arising from verbal communication. It seems practical to postulate a "common pool" of philosophical expressions, a certain distinct philosophical language, which was available to philosophers of both cultures. Various authors used these similes as building blocks in the expression of their theories, and they used them as it best suited their purposes.

Keywords

Sextus Empiricus; snake-and-rope; comparative philosophy; Pyrrhonism; Indian influence

¹ This article is a shortened version of a subchapter of my doctoral dissertation currently in preparation. I would like to express my gratitude to Ferenc Ruzsa for his valuable help and comments. I am also grateful to the École française d'Extrême Orient, and its Pondicherry Centre, for supporting this research.

Introduction

Parallels between the writings of Sextus Empiricus (c. 160–210 CE) and stock examples of Indian philosophy were first published by Aram M. Frenkian.² He studied three similarities present in both contexts: 1) the smoke and fire example used to illustrate inference in logical deductions; 2) the snake and rope example, attributed to Carneades (214–128 BCE), and used to illustrate mistakes in perception; 3) the usage of a logical device called quadrilemma or tetralemma in ancient philosophy and *catuṣkoṭi* in Indian literature. Frenkian's overarching conclusion, based on the investigation of these three similarities, was that Indian thought exercised influence over Greek philosophy through the channel of Greek Scepticism. It started with the founder of the Sceptic school, Pyrrho (360–270 BCE), who lived in India and learned from Indian sages. According to Diogenes Laertius and other sources, Pyrrho acquired the core of his philosophy, later known as Pyrrhonism or Scepticism, from the “naked Indian sages” – the gymnosophists. The Indian influence on Pyrrho's thought was also corroborated by Everard Flintoff's seminal study.³ Sextus Empiricus is the most well-known figure of ancient Pyrrhonism, who lived several centuries after Pyrrho, and the only ancient Sceptic who left voluminous works on Scepticism. According to Frenkian's hypothesis, there was, after Pyrrho, another instance of Indian influence through Carneades, as is shown by the snake and rope analogy.

In his detailed article about the Aristotelian and Indian inferences, Ferenc Ruzsa⁴ also tackles the question of Indian influence on Sextus' writings. Citing Flintoff on the Indian influence on Pyrrho, and referring to Frenkian, he similarly supports the view of Indian influence over Sextus through the mediation of the founding figure of Greek Scepticism, Pyrrho.

Contrary to Frenkian and Ruzsa, but based on the same three philosophical similarities, Thomas McEvilley⁵ in his groundbreaking and monumental volume on Indo-Greek philosophical relations, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, postulates an opposite direction of influence, namely, from Greece to India. While the former

² Aram M. Frenkian, “Sextus Empiricus and Indian Logic,” *Philosophical Quarterly (India)* 30 (1957): 115–26. Aram M. Frenkian, *Scepticismul Grec* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Romîne, 1996).

³ E. Flintoff, “Pyrrho and India,” *Phronesis* 25,1 (1980): 88–108.

⁴ Ferenc Ruzsa, “A szerszám és a módszer” [The tool and the method], in *Töredékes Hagymány. Steiger Kornélnek*. [Fragmentary tradition. For Kornel Steiger], 239–70 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2007), 240–41.

⁵ Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002), 498–499.

two scholars, a Classical Philologist and an Indologist respectively, maintain that despite the chronological difficulties regarding the available texts, the examples are the natives of India as opposed to Greek philosophy, McEvelley insists on emphasizing chronology. He concludes that Buddhism and especially “the Mādhyamika dialectic somehow came from Greece,” arguing that Nāgārjuna, the great Buddhist philosopher and founder of the Buddhist school called the Middle Path (*Madhyamaka*), was directly influenced by Greek dialectic.⁶

As is clear from this summary, the three major similarities present in Sextus’ text and in Indian philosophical writings (smoke-fire, snake-rope, and quadrilemma) inspired serious scholars to postulate influence from one culture to the other, partly based on the question of chronology. Karl Potter, however, the editor of the ongoing project, the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Philosophies* (now in its thick twenty-second volume), opined on Frenkian’s hypothesis in the following way: “All in all, we must be sober in our judgments on this exciting possibility of mutual East-West influence; repeated efforts by reputable scholars have found precious little to show any conscious borrowing.”⁷

In the present article, the snake-rope analogy is discussed in both Greek and Indian cultural contexts.⁸ We study texts which have not been hitherto studied in the scope of enquiry about Sextus’ hypothetical Indian connection, in order to revisit the propositions of earlier scholars and to conduct thorough research involving all available texts, facilitating our understanding on whether there is any pattern we can conclusively recognize in the available data.⁹ Finally, we are going to place our results in the context of all three similarities. While the other two are not described in their detailed study in the present article, the results about them will be summarized in order to give an overall picture on the question of Sextus’ Indian connections.

⁶ Ibid., 503.

⁷ Karl Potter, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Indian Philosophies. Vol. 2, The Tradition of Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika up to Gauḍeya* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977), 17.

⁸ In my dissertation, I study all three similarities separately.

⁹ We must stress the difficulty of available texts on both the Greek and the Indian side. Many texts have been lost or are fragmentary on the Greek side. On the Indian side, the primacy of verbal teaching versus written tradition must be remembered especially when dealing with early phases of philosophy. Chronological difficulties are omnipresent. Additionally, many early Buddhist texts exist only in Tibetan or Chinese translations. Furthermore, due to the vast material, it is possible that some occurrences of the similarities simply escape our attention. New evidence in the form of papyrus, manuscript or epigraphical discoveries might always come to light. In the article we give an exhaustive picture of the data that is available to us presently, but these precautions must be born in mind.

The snake and rope analogy

The snake and rope analogy, i.e. mistaking a rope for a snake in a dark room, appears in Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*Pyrrhoneae Hypotyposes*, PH I. 227–228) and in his *Against the Logicians* (*Adversus Mathematicos*, M VII. 187–188) to illustrate the Academic Carneades' theory of perception. In Indian philosophical writings, the image is an omnipresent stock example as a metaphor for the erroneous perception of metaphysical reality, first appearing in Buddhist writings but becoming especially popular through Vedānta. The image compares a person stepping into a dark room and mistaking a coiled rope for a snake to an ignorant person who does not know the real nature of the world. The content of this “real nature” differs from school to school: for some Buddhist schools, it is emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and for the Yogācāra Buddhist school, it is consciousness-only (*viññapti-mātra*); for the orthodox school Advaita Vedānta, it is Brahman. All schools, however, use this analogy to illustrate the error in the perception of metaphysical reality. Additionally, the different schools in Indian philosophies all developed epistemological theories, together with often elaborate theories of perception, where they also enumerated various defects of perception.¹⁰ It is curious, however, that we have found only one instance¹¹ where the analogy appears in a purely epistemological context, remaining far more frequent in metaphysical discussions on the Indian side.

Greek texts

In the Greek context, two occurrences that resemble the analogy are present in texts before Sextus: in Aesop's *Proverbia* 132 (c. third century BCE)¹², and in Demetrius' *De elocutione* §159 (c. second century BCE).¹³ The first occurrence of something resembling the snake-rope analogy is the following: “The one who has been bitten by the snake is scared even of the rope.”¹⁴

Although Aesop is generally dated to the sixth century BCE, he is more a legendary character than a historical author and the fables and proverbs extant under his name cannot be dated with certainty. It is probable that the collection

¹⁰ For an exhaustive survey, see Jadunath Sinha, *Indian Psychology* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1934).

¹¹ On the writings of the seventh-century Buddhist commentator Dharmakīrti, see below.

¹² Ruzsa, “A szerszám és a módster.” Ruzsa calls the metaphor the most spectacular Indian motif in Sextus.

¹³ Frenkian, “Sextus Empiricus and Indian Logic,” 123.

¹⁴ Ὁ δὲ χηθεὶς ὑπὸ δφρεως καὶ τὸ σχοινίον φοβεῖται. Aesop, *Proverbia*, 132. B. E. Perry, “Aesop. Proverbia,” in *Aesopica* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1952), 265–91. My translation is provided here.

of the proverbs dates to the second half of the first millennium BCE. It is also noteworthy that the transmission of Aesopian fables is due to Demetrius of Phalerum (third century BCE),¹⁵ the author to whom our second occurrence of the snake-rope example is attributed. The second occurrence of the analogy is not identical to what we find in Sextus in phrasing – but it is so in imagery:

Release from fear is also often a source of charm, for example a man needlessly afraid, mistaking a strip of leather for a snake or [an earthen vessel]¹⁶ for a gaping hole in the ground – mistakes which are rather comic in themselves.¹⁷

This text is attributed to Demetrius of Phalerum (c. 350–283 BCE),¹⁸ statesman and Peripatetic philosopher. The scholarly consensus denies the possibility of this attribution and many agree that the text was written in about the second century BCE, with attributions ranging from 270 BCE to the first century CE.¹⁹ Regarding our main investigation, it suffices to determine that the text is definitely pre-Sextian.

The author of the treatise on style and rhetoric uses this illustration in a description about different topics for charm (*charis*) (156–162§), where the subjects of the elegant style are enumerated: “proverb, fable, groundless fear, comparison and hyperbole.”²⁰ The occurrence of the snake-rope analogy in a context clearly related to the Aesopean genre strengthens the previous observation: the misperception of a rope or a strap as a snake could have been present in everyday Greek experience without relation to Indian philosophy.

¹⁵ H. J. Blackham, “The Fable in Literature,” in *The Fable as Literature*, 1–33 (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1985), 7.

¹⁶ Innes’ translation “a bread oven” is correct inasmuch as *κλιβανος* is used for baking bread, but it is actually an earthenware vessel. See Liddell-Scott-Jones: “covered earthen vessel, wider at bottom than at top, wherein bread was baked by putting hot embers round it.” *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones*, <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/#eid=1&context=ljsj> [Accessed April, 2018].

¹⁷ Πολλάκις δὲ καὶ ἐκ φόβου ἀλλασσομένου γίνεται χάρις, ὅταν διακενῆς τις φοβηθῆ, οἷον τὸν ἱμάντα ὡς ὄφιν ἢ τὸν κλιβανὸν ὡς χάσμα τῆς γῆς, ἅπερ καὶ αὐτὰ κωμωδικώτερα ἐστίν. Demetrius, *De elocutione*, 159. §, transl. by Doreen Innes in Demetrius, “On Style,” in *Aristotle: Poetics. Longinus: On the Sublime. Demetrius: On Style*, ed. Doreen Innes (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 307–523.

¹⁸ Tiziano Dorandi, “Chronology,” in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Keimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfeld, Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 49–50.

¹⁹ Demetrius, “On Style,” 311.

²⁰ Demetrius, “On Style,” 335.

These early occurrences, although not identical with the later appearance of the analogy, allude to mistaking a rope for a snake based on their similar properties. Its attribution to Aesop, the representative of everyday wit as opposed to high standards of literary or philosophical traditions, and also its appearance in comedy, alludes to the presence of the potential for mistaken perception of the two objects within common, indigenous Greek experience.

In Sextus Empiricus' works, the illustration is brought up to illuminate the position of the New Academy about impressions (*phantasia*). Impressions themselves are discussed within the wider context of the criterium: whether anything that can be applied as a criterium for truth exists. The head (scholarch) of the Academy, Arcesilaus, who became head in 264 BCE, led the school into its Sceptic phase. He maintained that there is no criterion of truth, and thus all knowledge is impossible.²¹ The next scholarch, Carneades (214–129 BCE),²² developed this idea and admitted grounds for action on the basis that subjective impressions arising from sense-perception can be regarded as apparently true (*phainomenē alēthē*),²³ and thus can provide a basis for action in everyday life.²⁴ This type of impression has to fulfil three requirements: it must be plausible, probable or persuasive (*pithanē*), unobstructed (*aperispastos*)²⁵, and thoroughly tested (*perihōdeumenē* or *diexhōdeumenē*).²⁶

²¹ R. G. Bury, *Sextus Empiricus. Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), xxxii–xxxiii.

²² Dorandi, “Chronology,” 48–9.

²³ *M VII*, 166.

²⁴ Bury, *Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, xxxvi.

²⁵ Both Bury's “irreversible” and Bett's “not turned away” for *phantasia aperispastos* seem to be lacking. Bett is right that etymologically the literal meaning of the word is “not turned away.” This literal translation, however, does not yield the real meaning and the genre of the technical term in the passage. Bury's “irreversible,” while also retaining the etymology, does not help the reader to understand what the concept means: the impression, in order to reach the mind and provide grounds for further action, cannot be turned back from the mind of the perceiver on the grounds that there is already another cognition which is contrary to the new perception. Sextus gives two similar examples to this. In *PH I*, 228–9, Admetus would not believe that he saw Alcestis alive due to his previous knowledge that she had died. In *M VII*, 180, Menelaus does not believe that he sees Helen on the island of Pharos due to his previous knowledge that he had left Helen on his own ship (and the Helen on the ship in reality was only a phantom). In both cases, the previous knowledge turns the new cognition away. It does not let the new cognition be recognized by the perceiver. Due to the lack of a proper English word for the term, I tentatively accept Péter Lautner's Hungarian version, “unobstructed impression,” and provide it in English to yield a rough equivalent of the term *phantasia aperispastos*. Péter Lautner, “Sextus Empiricus: A pürrhonizmus alapvonalai [Sextus Empiricus: The basics of Pyrrhonism],” in *Antik szkepticizmus* [Antique skepticism], ed. Gábor Kendeffy (Budapest: Atlantisz, 1998), 228.

²⁶ *M VII*, 176–82.

The example of the snake and the rope appears as an illustration to the probable and thoroughly tested impression. As is usual with Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and *Against the Logicians*, similar explanations are given in the two works, except for the one in the latter is more elaborate. Here, just as in *PH*,²⁷ the example is used to illustrate the plausible and tested impression.

M VII. 187–188. For example, someone observing a coil of rope in an unlit room immediately jumps over it, supposing it to be in fact a snake. But after this he turns round and examines what is true, and finding it motionless he already has in his thinking an inclination towards its not being a snake. Still, figuring that snakes are sometimes motionless when they go stiff from winter cold, he pokes the coil with a stick, and then, after thus exploring from all angles the appearance that strikes him, he assents to its being false that the body made apparent to him is a snake.²⁸

The example fits the theory perfectly well: an epistemological mistake which can be corrected due to close inspection. It seems to be an everyday-life example that illustrates the theoretical concept appropriately.

Sextus places the example in the theory of impressions developed by Carneades. Was it the latter who used the snake-rope analogy originally or is it simply an addition on Sextus' part?²⁹ Unfortunately, we lack evidence to state

²⁷ *PH I*, 227–28.

²⁸ οἷον ἐν ἀλαμπῇ οἰκίματι εἴλημα σχοινίου θεασάμενός τις παραυτίκα μὲν ὄφιν ὑπολαβὼν τυγχάνειν ὑπερίλατο, τὸ δὲ μετὰ τοῦτο ὑποστρέψας ἐξετάζει τάληθές, καὶ εὐρῶν ἀκίνητον ἦδη μὲν εἰς τὸ μὴ εἶναι ὄφιν ῥοπήν ἴσχει κατὰ τὴν διάνοιαν, ὁμῶς δὲ λογιζόμενος ὅτι καὶ ὄφεις ποτὲ ἀκίνητοῦσι χειμερινῶ κρύει παγέντες, βακτηρίᾳ καθικνεῖται τοῦ σπειράματος, καὶ τότε οὕτως ἐκπεριοδεύσας τὴν προσπίπτουσαν φαντασίαν συγκατατίθεται τῷ ψεῦδος εἶναι τὸ ὄφιν ὑπάρχειν τὸ φαντασθὲν αὐτῷ σῶμα. *M VII*, 187.4–188.5, transl. Richard Bett, *Sextus Empiricus. Against the Logicians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²⁹ Karl Potter quotes Frenkian in the following way: “The image of the coiled rope taken for a snake was used as illustration of the doctrine of Carneades in the 2nd century BC” (see Potter, *Encyclopaedia* 2, 19). This can be understood, and has been understood by numerous scholars, to mean that it was Carneades who first used this example to illustrate his theory about perception (see, for example, Suzanne Obdrzalek, “Carneades’ Pithanon and Its Relation to Epoche and Apraxia,” *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter* 354 (2002), or Alfred Schutz, “The Problem of Carneades; Variations on a Theme,” in *Collected Papers V. Phenomenology and the Social Sciences*, ed. Lester Embree, [Dordrecht: Springer, 2011], 101–23.) They base this assumption solely on Sextus *M* 182–188, where Sextus gives a summary of the explicitly Carneadean theory of perception. When moving on to examples, however, his parlance changes to a rather loquacious style and there is no hint that he is retelling an earlier example. Besides the snake-rope example, he also gives further illustrations to the theory, e.g., the notion of the unobstructed impression with the examples of Menclaus and Helene and Alcestis and Admetus (*M VII*.180, 186). Were these all original examples

anything conclusive on this question. Besides Sextus, the other main source of information about Carneades' teachings are the writings of Cicero which are silent about this illustration. It seems equally possible that it was either Carneades who used this metaphor or that it was Sextus who invented the metaphor to illustrate the Carneadian theory. From the lack of the example in Cicero, the probability of Sextus' invention seems greater.

Indian texts

On the Indian side, the picture is more complex. Surprisingly, the example is not present in Sanskrit texts before the second century CE. This is truly astonishing because in subsequent philosophical works the image of the snake-rope mistake becomes widespread. Potter is definitely right when, commenting on Frenkian's theory, he states that "the first two of these characteristically Indian allusions – the rope-snake illusion and the quadrilemma – are more Buddhist than Hindu, at least in those early days of which Frenkian speaks."³⁰ The earliest instances originate from the early centuries of the Christian era, and from a decidedly Buddhist context.

The greatest result of our research³¹ has been to locate the very first occurrence of the analogy in a Buddhist compendium entitled *Mahāvibhāṣā*, "a massive sourcebook of Sarvastivadin doctrine,"³² which consists of three texts. The analogy appears in the *Abhidharma-vibhāṣā-sāstra*, which was composed around 150 CE,³³ and is extant only in Chinese translation.³⁴

by Carneades or did Sextus supply his own set of examples? Malcolm Schofield in his discussion about Carneades' epistemology also differentiates between the theory of the Academic philosopher and Sextus' illustration. (Malcolm Schofield, "Academic Epistemology," in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, Keimpe Malcolm Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfield and Schofield, eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 349.) Regarding the smoke-fire example, however, we find that the Stoic-Epicurean context in Sextus is corroborated by the evidence found in the writings of the Epicurean Philodemus. Here also it might be the case that the example was really used by the Academic philosopher first, and was simply retold by Sextus. Cicero, the other main preserver of Carneadean thought does not refer to the snake-rope example.

³⁰ Potter, *Encyclopaedia* 2, 19.

³¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Mónika Szegedi, a Tibetologist, who has drawn my attention to the Vasubandhu-text, which in turn led to the *Mahāvibhāṣā*. I would also like to thank Melinda Pap, Sinologist, for the translation of the Chinese text.

³² Potter, *Encyclopaedia* 7, 123.

³³ Potter, *Encyclopaedia* 7, 511.

³⁴ One difficulty with this work is that it is uncertain whether the Chinese translator Hsüan-tsang added his own interpretation or whether he gave a faithful account of the Sanskrit original when he made the translation in 659.

It is like when the person sees a rope and takes it for a snake, or when he sees a tree trunk and takes it for a man, etc. To take a rope or a tree trunk as a snake or a man is mistaking phenomena and forms, and not lacking reason.³⁵

The next record we could find is attributed, albeit not unanimously, to Āryadeva,³⁶ a Buddhist thinker of the third century CE. The early authors who use the example are similarly Buddhists: Vasubandhu³⁷ and Asaṅga³⁸ (fourth century), Dignāga³⁹ (fifth century), Bahvya and Sthiramati (sixth century) and Candrakīrti⁴⁰ (seventh century).⁴¹ The first non-Buddhist author is Candrakīrti's contemporary, Gauḍapāda,⁴² an early representative of Advaita Vedānta. The analogy becomes popular in the Buddhist exegetical literature from the fifth century onwards, but it reached widespread popularity in the Vedānta school, especially due to the writings of Śaṅkara⁴³ (c. eighth century), the most influential systematizer of Advaita Vedānta. Below, we will explore some early examples.

The first firmly attributable text applying the snake-rope analogy is found in the work of Vasubandhu (fourth century CE), who is credited with the foundation of the Yogācāra school and was one of the most influential Buddhist philosophers. He was probably born around 316 CE and might have written the *Abhidharmakośa* around 350 CE.⁴⁴ He applies the snake-rope analogy in his autocommentary to the *Abhidharmakośa*, the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* (VI.58b):

³⁵ *Abhidharma-vibhāṣā-śāstra* 1545 [0036a10], transl. to Hungarian by Melinda Pap (personal communication).

³⁶ Āryadeva. *Cittaviśuddhīprakarana* 67–68. and *Hastavālanāmaprakaraṇavṛtti* 1–2.

³⁷ Vasubandhu. *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya* VI.58b. I would like to express my gratitude to Mónika Szegedi, who has discovered the employment of the snake-rope analogy in this locus and has provided me with the references.

³⁸ Asaṅga, *Mahāyānasamgraha* (MSG), 3.8.

³⁹ Dignāga, *Pramāṇa-samuccaya* Ch. 1. This work is extant only in Tibetan translation.

⁴⁰ Candrakīrti, *Prasannapadā* Ch. 25.3.

⁴¹ Dates are indicated mainly on the basis of the chronology given in various volumes of the *Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies*. More details about the chronologies are given under the discussion of the individual texts. Dignāga's *A Collection on the Means of Valid Knowledge* (*Pramāṇasamuccaya*, PS) is also enumerated by Frenkian and McEvelley as using the example, but they were following secondary literature on the fifth-century Buddhist philosopher. I could not locate the example in his writing they refer to. The example, however, is present in a commentary to Dignāga's work by the seventh-century author Dharmakīrti's *Commentary to the Means of Valid Knowledge* (*Pramāṇavārttika*, PV) ad PS Section 3. Bb.

⁴² Gauḍapāda, *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā* 2, 17–18.

⁴³ *Passim* in his works.

⁴⁴ Potter, *Encyclopaedia* 8, 483.

Another point: Among the Āryans (= the Śaikṣas) who do not reflect, the defilements which are abandoned by Meditation can arise by reason of the weakness of mindfulness; these defilements do not arise among the Āryans who reflect. In the same way that one thinks a rope is a snake if one does not observe it carefully (*Vibhāṣā*, TD 27, p. 36a20); [so too when one's attention is lacking, one forgets its metaphysical characteristics, the impermanence of the pleasant, etc.] but the error of personalism (*ātma-dṛṣṭi*) cannot arise among Āryans who do not reflect, because this error is a product of reflection.⁴⁵

Here, as in other early Buddhist occurrences, the analogy is used to illustrate the erroneous perception of reality. It is a characteristic example of the usage of the illustration, inasmuch as it does not stop at the level of perception, but it is used as a simile for the contradiction between the perceived experiential word and the underlying reality which is different from it. What this underlying reality consists in varies with the different schools: it can be voidness,⁴⁶ or for others it can be consciousness-only.⁴⁷ For Vedānta, it is Brahma, but the point is the same: contrary to everyday experience, there exists some underlying metaphysical reality, and the perception of this twofold phenomenon is similar to the mistaken perception of a rope as a snake. In other words, in the Indian context, perception and the epistemological errors are closely related to metaphysical and ontological considerations, and very often, this also implies soteriological aspects.

⁴⁵ ... *api khalv āryasyānupanidhyāyataḥ smṛtisampramoṣāt kleśa utpadyate nopanidhyāyato rajjvām iva sarpa samjñā / na cānupanidhyāyata ātma-dṛṣṭyādīnām upapattir yujyate santirakatvādīti nāsti darśanabheyakleśa prahaṇātparibāñih*; Vasubandhu, *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*, VI.58b [375|09–375|10]– [375|10–375|12] GREITIL text. Based on the editions of: (1) P. Pradhan, ed., *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu* (rev. 2nd ed.) (Patna: K.P. Jayaswal Research Center, 1975); (2) Swami Dwarikadas Shastri, ed., *Abhidharmakośa & Bhāṣya of Acarya Vasubandhu with Sphutartha Commentary of Acarya Yasomitra* (2 vols.) (Varanasi: Bauddha Bharati, 1998); Translation from Leo M. Pruden, *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam of Vasubandhu*, vol. 3, transl. into French by Louis de La Vallée Poussin. English Version by Leo M. Pruden (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1988–1990), 1005; The same passage in Sangpo's translation: "Another point. In the noble ones (= those in training) who do not reflect (*upanidhyāyati* = *samīrayati*), the defilements abandoned by cultivation can arise due to a "lapse of mindfulness" (*smṛtisampramoṣa*); {4b} these defilements do not arise in perfected beings who reflect. Just as one takes a rope (*rajju*) for a snake (*sarpa*) if one does not pay attention (MVŚ, 36a20); (likewise, when attention is absent, one forgets the metaphysical characteristic, the impermanence of the agreeable, etc.). (...)" In: Sangpo, Gelong Lodrö, *Abhidharmakośa-Bhāṣya. The Treasury of the Abhidharma and its (Auto)commentary by Vasubandhu*, vol. 4 (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2012).

⁴⁶ As in the *Treatise on the Hair on the Hand* (*Hastavālanamaprakaraṇavṛtti*).

⁴⁷ In the *Summary of the Great Vehicle* (*Mahāyānasamgraha*).

There is another very interesting aspect of the early Buddhist usage of the example. In two instances,⁴⁸ the analogy is further developed: it is not enough that what has been mistakenly perceived as a snake is in reality a rope, but the rope itself is mistakenly perceived as an independent entity while in reality, it is a compound unit consisting of further components. When one analyzes the rope itself, one will find that in reality nothing like the “rope” exists. Both instances are from the earliest phase of the analogy in the third and fourth centuries. Let us quote the *Commentary to the Treatise Named the Hair on the Hand (Hastavālanāmaprakaraṇavṛtti, H)* 1.c–d:

1.c–d. When its parts (i.e. the parts of the rope) are seen, also the cognition concerning that (rope) is illusory, as (the cognition of) the snake.

Commentary: If one examines also that rope, after having divided it into its parts, the existence in itself of the rope is not perceived. Since this (existence in itself of the rope) is not perceived, also the perception of the rope, like the thought of “a snake,” is only a mere illusion, nothing else. Further, just as the cognition of the rope is an illusion, in the same way, (in relation to) those parts (of the rope), also, when (their) fractions, particles and so on are examined, their existence in itself (i.e. the existence in itself of the parts of the rope) is not grasped as something real; the thought which has the form of the perception of those (parts of the rope), like the thought of the rope, is only a mere illusion.⁴⁹

As mentioned above, the snake-rope simile can be found in a purely epistemological context in Indian philosophy, too, but compared to the sources listed above, this has a rather late provenance. The only source is Dharmakīrti’s *Commentary to the Means of Valid Knowledge (Pramāṇavārttikā, PV)*.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Asaṅga, *Summary of the Great Vehicle (Mahāyānasamgraha, MSG)* 3.8; and in the *Commentary to the Treatise Named the Hair on the Hand (Hastavālanāmaprakaraṇavṛtti, H)* 1.c–d, attributed to Āryadeva. In *H*, the recognition of the non-existence of essential nature (*asvabhāva*) is due to a simpler whole-part analysis, while in *MSG* the specific characteristics (*lakṣaṇa*) serve as the grounds for the analysis of the rope and the consequence of the notion of consciousness-only (*vijñaptimātratā*).

⁴⁹ Carmen Dragonetti and Fernando Tola, “The Hastavālanāmaprakaraṇavṛtti,” *Journal of Religious Studies* 8, no. 1 (1980): 18–31, 24–5.

⁵⁰ *PV* III.297, *Commentary to Dignāga’s A Collection on the Means of Valid Knowledge (Pramāṇasamuccaya, PS)* ad Section 3. Bb, written in the fifth century CE.

If the erroneous perception of *dvi-candra* [the double-moon] were held to be caused by the *manas* [mind], this would involve the following absurd conclusions: (1) it would be removed even when the defect of the *indriya* [sense-organ] is not cured, as the erroneous mental cognition of a snake of what is really a rope is removed simply by the close examination of the object.⁵¹ ... PV III. 297

Here we see an epistemological usage of the simile resembling Sextus' illustration, without any metaphysical allusions. The context is different, however. By this time, a complex theory of epistemological errors (*bhrānti*) had developed and Indian philosophers had been debating about what kinds of errors exist, e.g., those due to mental misrepresentations or defects of the senses. Dharmakīrti was definitely familiar with this discourse. Despite that, however, this example is not generally discussed in literature dealing with perceptual errors, e.g., it is missing from Maṇḍana Mīśra's eighth-century work, *Vibramaviveka*.⁵² This can be regarded as a sign that the analogy was not an epistemological example used for perceptual error in Indian literature but rather it was used metaphysically.

The first non-Buddhist occurrence of the analogy is present in Gauḍapāda's *Māṇḍūkya-kārikā*, an obviously Advaita Vedāntin text. This fact supports the hypothesis of Buddhist influence on the Advaita school. Following this Vedānta usage, and especially due to the influence of the works of Gauḍapāda's disciple Śaṅkara, the analogy gained widespread popularity in Hindu philosophical texts as an expression of the misperceived metaphysical reality, bearing the promise of liberation attainable through correct knowledge, thus representing epistemological soteriology.

Mythology

While snakes are and were present in the Greek-speaking world, most probably it would be India that has and had larger and more spectacular species, including those with lethal venom. This zoological fact in itself is not sufficient to reach confirmation about the primacy of the snake-rope image. In order to examine if the analogy is "more natural" for Indian than for Greek philosophical usage, let us have a brief overview of the mythological layer, which generally pre-dates the appearance of philosophical speculation.

⁵¹ *Sarpādi-bhrāntīvac cāsyāḥ syād akṣa-vikṛtāv api*. Dharmakīrti. *Pramāṇavṛtti* III. 297. Paraphrased by Dignāga Hattori, *On Perception*, transl. by Masaaki Hattori. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 96.

⁵² Lambert Schmithausen, *Maṇḍanamīśra' Vibramavivekaḥ* (Vienna: Hermann Böhlau Nachf.), 1965.

Snakes are definitely present in Greek mythology and are regarded (similarly to the universal symbolism of serpents) in two aspects, one as a fearful and ferocious image, while the other, mainly in the Asclepius-mythology, as a helpful animal associated with healing. For the fearful image, numerous examples could be cited from the archaic layers of Greek mythology,⁵³ let us just refer to Ophion, Gorgon, Chimaera, etc. From a later phase, the example of the child Heracles might be recalled, who strangled two serpents in his cradle with his own hands. While in these examples the mythological snakes, though dangerous and fearful, are of smaller size, in one of the most well-known myths, explicitly large species are depicted in the case of Laocoon and his sons.⁵⁴

It seems that on mythological basis, the possibility of mistaking a snake for a rope and that such an event is capable of causing fear is definitely present – but we must emphasize that while the possibility is present, no such incident is found in Greek mythology.

On the other hand, one of the most fundamental Indian myths contains exactly such an episode: the churning of the ocean (*samudra-mantana*),⁵⁵ where the gods, in extended warfare with demons, use the snake-king (*nāgarāja*) Vāsuki as a rope to churn the Ocean of Milk in order to receive the nectar of immortality (*amṛta*). This mythological episode can be treated as the proto-image of the snake-rope analogy – thus its Indian primacy, at least regarding mythology, can be accepted.

Comparison

Conceptually, the two cultures use the image in two distinct ways. While Sextus is confined to perception only, and that also in a very distinctly and elaborately detailed epistemological system of perception and cognition developed by Carneades, without any far-reaching conclusion about metaphysics, in most Indian occurrences, the relevance of the snake-rope image lies in the metaphysical and soteriological aspects. Sextus uses the snake-rope image as an *example* for erroneous perception in epistemological context while in the Indian occurrences it is applied primarily as an *analogy* for the erroneous perception of the metaphysical reality.

⁵³ From the pre-Greek layer, we can refer to the Minoan Snake Goddess figurines, dated to c. 1600 BCE.

⁵⁴ In the Homeric epics, the episode is not present. Sophocles wrote a tragedy about Laocoon in the fifth century BCE.

⁵⁵ The credit of bringing this myth in connection with the philosophical usage of the snake-rope analogy goes to Ferenc Ruzsa. The myth is found in the *Mahābhārata* (I.18), the *Rāmāyaṇa* (45.), the *Viṣṇu-purāṇa* (I.9), and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. The earliest texts date to about the fifth to fourth century BCE, with parts originating perhaps earlier.

Any similar idea is missing on the Greek side. Some of the earliest appearances of the image differ from later occurrences in that they represent a two-step mental process where in the second step even the rope is realized as a non-entity. In later usage, this second step is omitted.

Chronologically, we face several difficulties on both sides, mainly due to the lack of numerous sources. As for the Greek text, the question is whether the example was first used by Carneades, or whether it was Sextus who used the example on his own. It seems to me that from the lack of other sources on Carneades' theory of perception, we can postulate that the example originates with Sextus. If this is the case, the primacy in the philosophical application of the image belongs to the Indian context, but the time of the respective first occurrences are very close: the *Mahāvibhāṣā* is dated around 150 CE, while the dates attributed to Sextus are traditionally 150–250 CE. Still, as we can see, the very first occurrences originate from about the third or second centuries BCE in the Greek world from a context that is rooted in everyday experience and appear in proverbial usage (Aesop, Demetrius).⁵⁶ Regarding Frenkian's observation that snakes are more characteristic of India than the Greek ecological environment, we have referred to the widespread presence of snake or serpent imagery in Greek mythology. The strong presence of snake-cult in Greek mythology together with the occurrence at a proverbial and comical level would question the hypothesis of Indian origin of the example in Sextus. The employment of a snake as a rope in Indian mythology gives the primacy of the image to the Indian context.

The scarcity of the example within Greek philosophical context must also be emphasized. Besides Sextus' works, and there solely in connection with the Carneadean theory, the motif is completely missing. In Indian texts, on the other hand, especially after the fourth century, it gained a widespread application.

Conclusion

Regarding the theories of influence, the following observations can be made. Interestingly, we have found that the first occurrences of philosophical applications of the example arose at approximately the same time, the second to third century CE. This closeness in time may allude to actual exchange.

⁵⁶ It must be admitted, however, that the presence of the example in the Demetrius-text, which is dated to the second century BCE, is contemporaneous with Carneades – something which could be an argument for the earlier presence of the analogy in the philosophical field. Nonetheless, until other evidence is found, I regard the analogy as first applied by Sextus.

Regarding Frenkian's original hypothesis that the image would have arrived directly from India either through Pyrrho or through Carneades, we have found no evidence as the first occurrence of the written analogy in Indian works dates to the second century CE or later, which postdates both Greek philosophers.⁵⁷

Regarding the other direction of influence, from Greece to India, as proposed by McEvelley, the newly found evidence in the second-century *Vibhāṣā* rules out this possibility. Concerning McEvelley's hypothesis regarding the influence Sextus could have exerted on the Mādhyamika school, there is an undeniable similarity regarding the overall polemical aim of both Sextus and Nāgārjuna⁵⁸ in the listing and refuting of all philosophical tenets around them. There are no clear dates for Nāgārjuna, but the widest time frame assigned to him is about 150–250 CE – slightly later than Sextus. The hypothetical location of his activities in the second half of his life to South India also makes it possible that he might have met some teachings of Greek philosophy as there had been undeniable Mediterranean cultural presence in the period on the southern coasts, especially around the ports of Musiris and Podukē (near present-day Thrissur and Pondicherry respectively).

Despite all these general circumstances, which are favorable for the theory of influence from the Greek side to the Indian, especially regarding Buddhist philosophy, textually we could not find enough convincing evidence. Furthermore, as this specific image of the snake and rope analogy is missing in Nāgārjuna's works, this cannot be used as evidence to support such a hypothesis, especially not in the form which McEvelley postulates that whole compendia of Greek philosophy could have exerted literary influence (“possibly in the form of a Sceptical handbook which brought the forms of Greek dialectic”).⁵⁹ It is imaginable that some kind of verbal interaction took place and had some influence – but this could have provided inspiration and furnished building blocks of expressions rather than proving to be literal borrowings.

Turning back to the original three similarities observed by Frenkian, Ruzsa and McEvelley, in the case of the smoke-fire example, conceptual agreements are also found together with the application of the illustration. Regarding the subject of our present inquiry, on the other hand, only the imagery is the same but the concept for which the image is used is different. Potter's statement about the

⁵⁷ It is possible that the image was already present in the spoken tradition, but its absence from the earliest Buddhist compendium, the voluminous and extensive Pali Canon, or the second-century BCE *Questions of King Milinda*, raises questions about the presence of the motif in the spoken tradition.

⁵⁸ Potter, *Encyclopaedia* 8, 13.

⁵⁹ McEvelley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, 499.

snake-rope analogy being a “characteristically Indian allusion”⁶⁰ must be modified: chronologically the image appears first in Greek writings. What is characteristically Indian about it is its mythical, metaphysical and soteriological application.

Even if there was any kind of influence, it must have been in the form of spoken exchange of ideas, and in this case, maybe not even at a philosophical level but only at a colloquial level of a proverbial usage.⁶¹ Then the proverb became utterly transformed and was used as a building block to express the various theories of the different schools.

Returning to the proposal of Frenkian, Ruzsa and McEvelley regarding the three similar elements in Sextus Empiricus’ writings and Indian philosophy, the following conclusion can be drawn. It has been found that the very first proto-image of the snake and rope analogy, is found in Indian mythology, in the episode of the churning of the ocean where a snake was used as a rope. In written form, the example of mistaking a rope for a snake first appears in Greek texts. Contrary to the smoke-fire motif, here no conceptual similarity is found: while in the Greek context, the image is used for an epistemological theory, from the very first occurrence in Indian discourse, the image is used as an analogy for metaphysical purposes, an aspect completely missing from the Greek context.

To make a cautious conclusion, we might state that both images were present and were more natural in Indian everyday reality, mythology and epics as a first step. But as we could see, the first philosophical usage of these images is found recorded in Greek texts and it has subsequent provenances only in later layers of Indian philosophy.

A somewhat different pattern has been outlined regarding a third element, the tetralemma. It became frequently used already in the time of the Buddha, mainly in Sceptic, and then in several Buddhist schools also. Although there are

⁶⁰ Potter, *Encyclopaedia* 2, 19.

⁶¹ Let me refer here cursorily to another similarity at the proverbial level. There is an Indian maxim current in literature about frogs referred to as *kūpa-maṇḍūkya-nyāya*, “the maxim of a frog in the well” by Jacob, who explains: “it is applied to an inexperienced person brought up in the narrow circle of home and ignorant of public life and mankind.” One immediately remembers Plato’s similar image in *Phaedo* 109 when he compares the peoples of the Mediterranean to “ants or frogs about a pond,” (ὥσπερ περὶ τέλμα μύμηκας ἢ βατράχους) with limited knowledge about the wider or “real” world. G. A. Jakob, *Laṅkāikanyaijalīḥ. A Handful of Popular Maxims* (Bombay: Nirṇaya-Sāgar Press, 1907), 20.; Plato, *Platonis Opera*, ed. John Burnet (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903). Should one postulate influence in this case? If any, it must have been at the colloquial level of exchanged or widespread proverbs that became used as building blocks furnishing illustrations for different concepts. Here again, the scarcity of the simile in the Greek philosophical and literary tradition gives way to the hypothesis of intellectual exchange.

some similar cases in pre-Pyrrhonian Greek philosophy, namely one classical tetralemma in Plato,⁶² one tetralemma-like occurrence in Parmenides,⁶³ and one in Aristotle's writings,⁶⁴ it is Pyrrho who is credited with making it the focal point of his philosophy. In addition to Diogenes Laertius' and others' reports of Pyrrho's travels to India and his encounter with and learning from Indian Gymnosophists there,⁶⁵ Flintoff's reasoning regarding Indian influences on Pyrrho are very convincing.⁶⁶ Furthermore, it seems that besides the above enlisted occurrences, i.e. after Pyrrho, it was only Sextus, a representative of the Greek Sceptical school, who applied this fourfold method – so in the case of the tetralemma, I am inclined to accept the theory of direct Indian influence on Pyrrho.

It is important to point out that Sextus' works are not his own philosophical achievements exclusively or primarily, but rather, he provides a compendium of all preceding philosophical schools and their tenets to refute them. Thus, the similarities that are present in his oeuvre are not necessarily proofs of Indian influences on Sextus but they show the elements that Greek philosophy had in common with the Indian side.

One can question the necessity to postulate interaction instead of independent development. Given the historical relations, and the allusions to cultural interconnection, however, it seems highly probable that these elements were "travelling" in the area of the Oikumene. This does not mean servile borrowing. Rather on the contrary, as our examples show, the raw material was modified to fit the purposes of those who found them expressive of their own tenets. These images, metaphors, linguistic expressions were taken up, twisted and shaped to become building blocks to fit the context of the given school.

⁶² Plato, *Republic* 5, 479c.

⁶³ Parmenides, Fr. 6, Simplicius, *Phys.* 1 1 7, 4.

⁶⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV 4, 1008a 30–35.

⁶⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* IX. 11. 61.

⁶⁶ Flintoff, "Pyrrho and India."

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