



The North Texas

Skeptic

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Comments on astrology

by John Blanton

We received the following correspondence from Jagdish Maheshri:

Randi Foundation has recommended me to contact you for looking into my claim.

It's about astrology. I'm attaching the material that I sent in the mail to Randi Foundation as I am taking the paranormal challenge. Basically I'm trying to define the procedure (I would need lot of help from you in doing so) that would be completely fair and scientific.

[attached file list]

The brief description of the claim is:

Based on birth information alone (birth date, hospital-recorded birth time, and birth place) I, the applicant, will provide astrology-based readings for a group of five totally unknown subjects at a time. A double-blinded test methodology will be employed. (The preliminary procedural details are provided in the attached documents describing the entire test with definition of terms used in the proposed test and an illustration example. Please review all the test details and provide me with your comments. A positive test result constitutes achieving 5 hits in 10 or less runs.) I'm also attaching a spreadsheet detailing the probability calculations. According to my calculations 50 percent probability for getting 5 hits require 23 or more runs. For 5 hits in 20 runs it's 37% probability, 5 hits in 15 runs it's 16.4% and 5 hits in 10 runs it's 3.2%. My question is what's the criteria you use for validity of my claim....how much improvement I have to show over the normal 50 percent probability.

I hope this information would help expedite in looking into my claim. Looking forward to hearing from you soon. Thanks again.

Regards,

Jagdish C. Maheshri, Ph.D.

Astro Insight

EVENTS CALENDAR

June Program

Saturday, June 14 , at 2 pm,
Center for Nonprofit Management, 2900
Live Oak Street in Dallas (corner of Live
Oak and Liberty)
Free and open to the public

Darwin's Black Box

The North Texas Skeptics will present a review of the book *Darwin's Black Box*. John Blanton will detail the conflict between science and religion that this book represents. *Darwin's Black Box* was written by biochemist Michael Behe in an effort to promote creationism. Mr. Blanton will discuss the scientific community's strong opposition to this book. Mr. Blanton has made a fourteen year study of creationism and has written and lectured on the topic for The North Texas Skeptics. He is Secretary of The North Texas Skeptics.

Social Dinner and Board Meeting

Saturday, June 28, at 7:30 pm.
Black-eyed Pea Restaurant on Forest Lane
in Dallas – about one block west of Central
Expressway, south side of Forest Lane

Call the NTS Hotline at **(214) 335-9248** for more information or if you plan to attend. We sometimes reschedule these events.

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What Dr. Maheshri outlined for us was a protocol to test his method for computing astrological charts (horoscopes). When a horoscope is written for a person it is supposed to provide the subject some useful information. For example, the horoscope might indicate that it would be best to put off a wedding until next year. The source for this useful information is supposedly the position of the stars and planets at the time of the subject's birth.

Putting aside for the moment the question of how this is supposed to work, let's consider how we can determine whether the information provided is useful. In the wedding schedule example the subject may postpone the wedding until next year. Then maybe marital conflict and divorce will follow shortly thereafter. Was the advice useful? Would the outcome have been different if the wedding had not been put off? It's hard to tell. You can't rewind the tape and make a different decision.

To test the principles of astrology you might test it from a different aspect. Maybe you think the advice is good (always has been in the past). Was the advice any better than you could have received from a fortune cookie? One way to tell is test whether the advice is pertinent to you. For example, if you are already married, then advice to put off the wedding until next year doesn't make much sense. A reasonable person would grow suspicious.

A competent astrology should not rashly hand out advice to unknown persons. Giving the just described wedding advice to unknown subjects could quickly erode customer confidence. A thoughtful astrologer would like to interview the subject before making the horoscope.

Then, what is the power of astrology? If you need to meet the subject in order write a decent horoscope, maybe a close friend could provide just as good advice without consulting the stars. To test the power of astrology you have to find out what can be accomplished using the stars alone.

The problem is, if you use the stars, and you don't have any personal information about the subject, you run the danger of being just an ambulatory fortune cookie. Particularly, if the horoscope is not pertinent to the *subject*, it is likely the advice within will not be much good. A horoscope needs to reveal something about the subject that can't be discerned by birth information alone. There has to be some aspect of clairvoyance to astrology.

Clairvoyance can be tested easily. Produce a horoscope for an unknown person. If the horoscope does not match the subject (e.g., telling Saddam Hussein he should consider himself first), then it's a good sign the horoscope is only half baked. So, maybe we should just do people's horoscopes and see if they at least fit the subject. At least you can tell if your own horoscope is a match, right?

Magician and debunker of hokum James Randi has previously demonstrated this idea. For a college class he collected birth information with the promise to forward it all to an astrologer. The astrologer was to prepare horoscopes for each student based entirely on the birth information. No names. When the horoscopes were ready Randi put the proper

names on the scripts and passed them out to the students. With few or no exceptions (we got to see the class response on video tape) the students agreed their horoscopes were a match. The “astrologer” was able, to the satisfaction of each, to describe the subjects.

The problem was, all the horoscopes were the same. Randi had most likely written the script himself and in such general terms that each student saw himself reflected. For many of the students it was an eye opener. For at least one it was just a dirty trick that proved nothing.

That brings us back to the test proposed by Dr. Maheshri. He mentioned in his note that the test was proposed by the James Randi Education Foundation. The test protocol Maheshri proposed was this:

- Obtain birth information for ten subjects. Birth time (including year and date) must be accurate to one minute. Birth place must be localized to the city or with similar accuracy.
- Provide the anonymized information to Dr. Maheshri.
- Dr. Maheshri will compute the horoscopes and return them to the NTS.
- We will separate the scripts into two groups of five and make five copies of each script.
- We will give each subject his own script, still anonymized and mixed with the four other scripts from his group.
- Each subject will pick (if he can) his own script from the collection of five he is given.

You now may now begin to see Randi’s imprint. Each subject must see enough in the scripts to recognize himself in one, more than in the others. The test is to be considered a success for astrology (and Dr. Maheshri’s method) if five or more subjects out of the ten pick their own scripts.

We did verify Dr. Maheshri’s calculations. By chance alone there is about a 3% chance of success for astrology. In general practice, outcomes that beat odds of twenty to one (5%) are considered statistically significant. For example, a medication that shows statistically significant results in clinical trials may be deemed worth developing. If Dr. Maheshri’s horoscopes score five out of ten in the test just described, then it will make a strong case for his methods.

In the mean time we have been passing over a central question concerning Dr. Maheshri’s astrology. Recall that he needs to know the time of birth (to the nearest minute) and the location to within a city-sized region. The combination of time and location fixes the position with respect to the horizon of the per-

tinents stars and planets. The time of birth (minute, hour, day, etc.) also fixes the relative positions of the heavenly bodies. It is necessary to know the location and time of birth accurately in order to accurately compute the position in the sky of the stars and planets.

If you are skeptical of all this, then by now you are asking “So, what’s the big deal anyhow?”

Good question. Over the course of a human life what should it possibly matter where the heavenly bodies were when you were born? Even assuming the possibility that stars and planets have an instantaneous effect on earthly events, how likely is it that any one-time effect can regulate events far into the future. Life on Earth, like most happenings, is a dynamically unstable system. Small events perturb the system, and these perturbations become amplified enormously in quick order. Projecting the effect of a single event into the future becomes problematical in the short term and absurd in the long term.

An example I sometimes use is the bullet that almost killed me. I never saw the bullet fired nor did I hear the shot. That’s because I had not been born yet. Neither had my father. But my father’s father heard the shot. His cousin was playing quick draw with a revolver on the family farm and plugged the senior John Blanton in the gut. They took the bullet out near Granddad’s spine—he was only nineteen years old. My grandmother had not even been born at the time, so the biological implications of a few centimeters one way or the other are obvious. A fly buzzing or a flash of sunlight in the eye, and you would not be reading this.

All this makes a person wonder. How is astrology supposed to overcome this uncertainty and provide us any useful information? Imagine the first John Blanton’s horoscope describing how he would, at the age of 40, marry an 18-year-old girl and go on to have seven scraggly children on a dirt farm in Hood County. Missing, of course, the critical fact that he would be dead at the age of 19.

We may continue to wonder at this. For the time being we are only going to test Dr. Maheshri’s basic premise: that his subjects can recognize their horoscopes and correctly pick them out of a pile. We are currently collecting the required birth information for a test with ten subjects. It’s not all that easy, because birth records may not always accurately reflect the time of birth. However, once we get the ten we will set Dr. Maheshri to work and go from there.

If you would like to participate, then please send us birth information samples as described above. It’s best if the subjects are more than twenty years old (remember, babies can’t read their own horoscopes). Then stand by for news.



Experiments with astrology

by Jagdish Maheshri

Most of us have always been curious about our fate, destiny, and future happenings—especially those of us who have gone through unexpected times of turbulence and despair for which often there is no rational explanation. These experiences shatter our security, a state, as living creatures we always strive for. Thus, when we recognize our vulnerability to situations beyond our control, we tend to take refuge in anything that offers us hope to regain the feeling of security and stability. It is no surprise that some of us are very curious about what lies in our future and seek consultations from people who could help: psychics, astrologers, and the like.

Astrology has been around for a long, long time. During the ancient period of Greek and Indian civilizations it was extremely popular. Astrologers were well respected. Today astrology doesn't quite enjoy that status for a variety of reasons. For one, with the advent of scientific progress and development over the last several centuries, for any science to survive, its basis must be tested and verified. Astrology, unfortunately, over these years has been neglected as a thing of the past and labeled as a satanic practice. Apparently it is perceived as a negative force that causes one to lose control over his life. As a result, it has primarily remained in the hands of those who are unable to treat and respect it as a science. It never had a chance to bloom and to further develop based on research. Thus, mostly it remains mired in skepticism with its orthodoxy tinged. So it's not surprising that the popularity of astrology has become limited to just a passing interest, and at least on the surface, it has been ridiculed and made fun of, perhaps by the very people who are dying to know what lies ahead in their future.

One of the biggest obstacles keeping astrology from universal acceptance is its very nature of affecting an individual. Assuming astrology is reasonably perfected as a science for making future predictions, it is very easy for a normal individual to become overwhelmed with it to the extent that the individual loses control of his or her life by literally becoming a slave of astrology. But if the very same individual looks at astrology as a guide or means to understand unique happenings surrounding him in his life, astrology becomes a blessing. It allows a person to enrich and enhance his life by helping uncover his hidden talents and abilities, and further help him discover who he or she is, and even to help provide meaning to life.

What is fascinating about astrology is the possibilities it offers at the collective human experience level. It has the ability to foresee the steps of human evolution. For instance, the expo-

mental technological growth that has occurred in the previous century certainly affects us the way we live today. From a global evolution standpoint, we as a human beings definitely have been transformed to a different (and perhaps a much higher) level during this century. The rapid evolutionary growth can be convincingly explained perhaps only through astrology, by understanding the influence of planetary motions on our collective human conscious. Further, with the aid of astrology, the future of human evolution can be predicted, and to some extent, astrology can provide us the opportunities to avoid pitfalls and to use our energies in a positive and harmonious manner to realize the full growth of our collective human conscious.

A chance encounter with a lecturer in the late sixties in India got me to investigating astrology in relationship to the concepts of solid geometry. The more I tried to challenge the rules (the logic of interpreting a planetary configuration for predicting an event) the deeper I got into the mess. Although I discovered the rules that resulted in the unsuccessful application in astrology, the very questioning of those rules forced me to seek solutions elsewhere. Also, there were things that my conscious wouldn't allow me to ignore. Although the rules were not very refined, I was impressed with some of the applications of astrological correlations and their basis in those books. Then I asked myself a question—what if I were on their side? Then how would I go about explaining the problem?

For the next several years I continued my pursuit as time permitted. I analyzed thousands of horoscopes. With the use of a computer I figured out a way to compute the geocentric positions of the planets. Later, using my personal computer, I could print out a horoscope in less than 30 seconds. I could now devote more time for research on analyzing and interpreting a horoscope. I was improving and using unique approaches in interpreting a horoscope with a fairly good accuracy. But when it came to timing a prediction, an important step of astrology, there were cases that would defy the prediction logic, which I thought, was unchallengeable! I wasn't very happy with the methods of timing a prediction with a reasonable degree of accuracy. Then in the early nineties I discovered a new approach, which has totally revolutionized the way to time a prediction. It has dramatically reflected in my confidence and success rate.

As an independent researcher in astrology I would like to say I did start out to prove that astrology is unscientific. As a Ph.D. in chemical engineering, I'm research minded, and I have been following the steps: observation, hypothesis, theory, and validation to see if astrology can be a science.

The problem with the current state of astrology is that it's in hands of those who have very little scientific background, and therefore, it's not treated and respected as science. Because it would require a tremendous amount of resources for research,

unless the research is funded, I don't see any hope in the near future that astrology will enjoy the status of a science.

One of the most difficult challenges in the successful application of astrology is the birth time accuracy. Usually the given birth time is not very precise due to either its unavailability, vague recollection, or guesswork. The importance of accurate birth time will only gain public acceptance if people's perception of astrology becomes positive. That can only happen when the successful application of astrology for individual charts begins to materialize. When and if that happens, the hospitals would be forced to give serious consideration in keeping the record of birth time accurate to the nearest minute for every baby they deliver. And that situation would tremendously enhance the further development of astrology, as astrologers would no longer have to deal with laborious trial and error method and guesswork in estimating the accurate birth time for prediction purposes.

I have come up with some very basic theories for both mundane, and natal astrology. I have authored a book titled *It's all in Timing* that sheds light on my unique application of research-based nine-fold horoscope technique. The validity of the technique is evident, as illustrated by its application on late President Nixon's birth chart.¹

I would like to see people at least recognize the potential that astrology can offer to enhance our lives in terms of setting right life goals and life choices. For more information and answers to typical FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) I urge that you visit my Web site. I would very much appreciate your comments and critiques and wouldn't mind explaining further why there's nothing wrong with astrology—that the problem may lie with those who interpret it.

Astrology never solves your problems. It's you who solve them! But you can benefit from astrology when you consider it as a means of personal guidance, a source of second opinion, or a way of confirming things that you already have some idea about. It certainly can be treated as a science of preventive maintenance through the insight it provides us to understand our weaknesses, strengths, capabilities and limitations, and the dynamic nature of our lives. Having some guidance about our natural aptitudes, capabilities, and limitations, astrology certainly provides an opportunity to improve our chances of making the best life choices and setting right life goals. With the help of knowledge of favorable as well as not-so-favorable periods an individual can use that knowledge to his or her advantage to achieve the most in life.



References

1. Visit my site: <http://www.astroinsight.com>

Skepticism's ancient origins (Part I)

Kickin' it old school with the development of skeptical thought in Ancient Greece

By Daniel R. Barnett

What was skepticism like before James Randi, Paul Kurtz, and Michael Shermer? Some people may be under the impression that the modern-day push for skeptical inquiry is strictly a recent phenomenon, but the history of skepticism actually extends back over around 2,500 years. Back in those days, in the absence of scientific empiricism, skepticism arose as a system of philosophy as distinct as Stoicism, Epicureanism, and other philosophical schools.

In the philosophy of skepticism, we find a continuous process of inquiry in which every observation or theory is tested with an opposite observation or theory. The goal of the skeptic as philosopher is to achieve tranquility, a sort of equilibrium with the world around her; by constantly challenging her own notions of reality, the skeptic seeks to achieve tranquility in her own life by ridding herself of dogma. Whether such dogma is theological, political, scientific, or otherwise, the philosophical skeptic considers dogma a sacred cow that, to steal a line from Abbie Hoffman, "makes the best hamburger."

To get a handle on how skepticism originated and developed, however, it is necessary to travel back to the 5th century BCE, back to a Greek philosopher named Democritus.

Democritus: From atomism to doubts concerning the senses

Born in Thrace, the north easternmost region of ancient Greece, Democritus (ca. 460-360 BCE) is best known for introducing the ancient world to the concept of the atom. In truth, Democritus didn't invent the concept; that honor belongs to his teacher, Leucippus. But it was Democritus who constructed a more thorough philosophical system based on the foundations of Leucippus' original concept of the atom. Leucippus and Democritus both taught that all matter is made up of atoms, indestructible and eternal building blocks of All That Is. The classic "four elements" of Air, Earth, Fire, and Water were themselves made up of uncountable numbers of atoms. Democritus then took the original concept a bit further, teaching that thought itself could be explained as the movement of atoms, just like any other natural phenomena. He described two different kinds of perception; one of sense perception and one of understanding.

When someone looks at an apple, the image of an apple that person receives is an “effluence” or shedding of atoms off of that apple; these atoms eventually enter the eyes and produce the aforementioned image of an apple. Two different people can look at that same apple and realize that it is indeed an apple, but when they both take a bite out of the apple, however, one may regard the apple as sweet while the other considers the apple to be sour. Democritus ascribes to sense perception the relative tastes of sweetness and sourness experienced by our two taste-testers, but both understand that it is indeed an apple that they have tasted. And so Democritus concluded, “by the senses we know in truth nothing sure, but only something that changes according to the disposition of the body and of the things that enter into it or resist it.”

This observation takes us back to Democritus’ concept of atoms. If what we see and hear and smell and taste are nothing but sense perceptions that do not give us any certain knowledge about what we experience, then that implies that all of our perceptions are just that. Aside from all of our conventions, according to Democritus, all is “in verity atoms and void.” Thus, our experiences with the apple are nothing more than subjective interpretations of an underlying objective reality.

Unfortunately for Democritus, the school of atomism didn’t maintain a large following long after his death, partially because the ancient Greeks had no way to prove the existence of atoms. Then there was the problem of how atoms clumped together to form water, rocks, trees, politicians, and so on. Did these atoms have hooks or something that allowed them to grab onto each other? Was fire composed of tiny, smooth atoms while rocks were made of bigger atoms? In addition to these questions, other Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato rejected atomism partially because of their own metaphysical takes on reality in which atoms and the void had no place.

Protagoras: Man as the measure of all things

Another native of Thrace, the Sophist philosopher Protagoras (ca. 480-411 BCE) was possibly the first Greek to make money off of higher education, and make money he did. Protagoras reportedly charged his students such high fees that Plato once remarked that Protagoras made more money than Phidias (the sculptor who built the Parthenon) and ten other sculptors combined.

Protagoras’ main contribution to Greek philosophy was his assertion that “man is the measure of all things, of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not.” This relativistic statement apparently meant that truth is relative to the person who maintains it; whatever knowledge that person achieves about anything is limited only by his own capabilities. Likewise, Protagoras maintained that knowledge is limited to our own subjective perceptions; thus, he denied the possibility of objective knowledge. There are no universal

truths; a thing has as many attributes as there are people who perceive it. Like that apple that was mentioned earlier, for instance.

Protagoras’ denial of absolutes also extended to moral judgments, although he conceded that the concept of law reflected the desire of a particular culture to maintain a sense of moral order. Despite his fame as a teacher, Protagoras was eventually accused of impiety by Pythodorus, an Athenian political leader. The charges were based on his book *On the Gods*, which began with the statement, “About the gods, I am not able to know whether they exist or do not exist, nor what they are like in form; for the factors preventing knowledge are many: the obscurity of the subject, and the shortness of human life.” In this admission, it can be discerned that Protagoras’ skepticism concerning natural and moral absolutes also extended to theological matters. Disagreement still persists on Protagoras’ punishment for impiety, but one of the most likely penalties was that *On the Gods* was burned, although quotes from the book survive in the writings of other Greek philosophers and historians. Protagoras’ most famous student, Socrates (ca. 469-399 BCE), would eventually be sentenced to death due to charges that he was causing the youth of Athens to have doubts about the gods.

While some skeptics consider Protagoras to be the most important skeptic of ancient time. I have to disagree with this assertion. Protagoras weakened confidence in the possibility of discovering true knowledge and helped cement relativism’s place in the history of philosophy, but Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle would produce their own criticisms of Protagoras’ arguments in which they asserted absolutes were indeed possible. Approximately 100 years after Protagoras’ death, however, another philosopher would attempt to take the Sophist’s relativistic concepts even further, displacing Man from the lofty position that Protagoras had assigned for him.

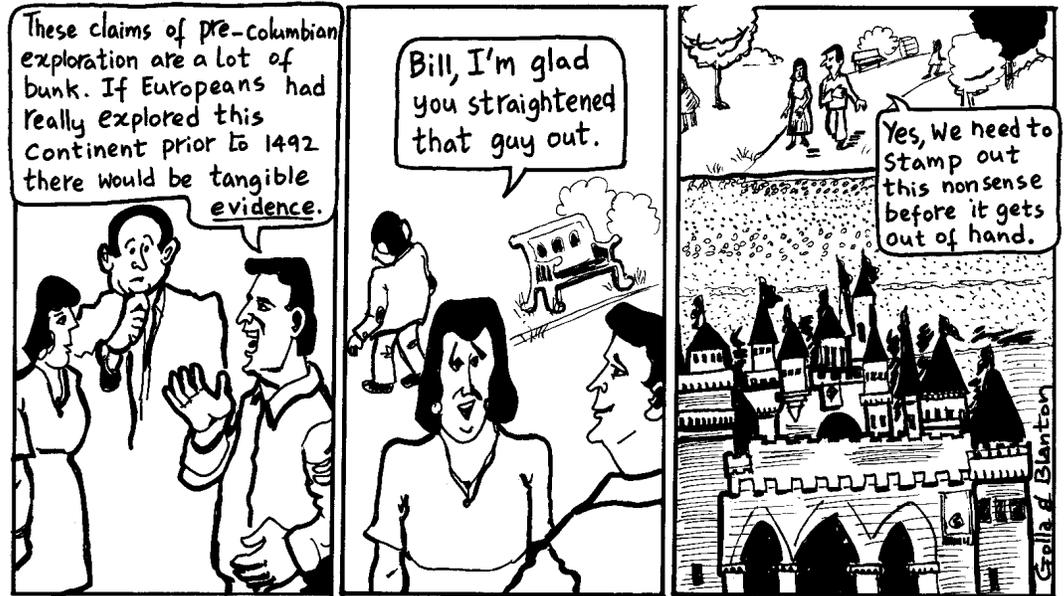
Pyrrho: Pursuing tranquility by suspending judgment

Pyrrho (ca. 361-270 BCE), a native of the Peloponnesian city of Elis, studied to become a painter in his youth until philosophy won him over. He studied the writings of Democritus, became a disciple of other Greek philosophers, including the Democritean philosopher Anaxarchus (ca. 340 BCE), and accompanied Alexander the Great on his conquest of the Middle East and India.

When he eventually made it back to Greece, Pyrrho apparently became increasingly dismayed at the various schools of philosophy that had popped up all over the countryside. There were Platonists, Aristotelians, Epicureans, Stoics, and a whole host of others. What apparently made them all alike in Pyrrho’s mind was the observation that all of these schools seem to have their own dogma. Even the assertion that there were no universal truths contained what appeared to be a dogmatic error – by asserting the non-existence of universal truths, by definition, that assertion becomes a universal truth, and perhaps even a testable and opposable one. Indeed, it seemed that any principle could be

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countered with an opposing principle, and then the two opposing principles would simply have to slug it out in the arena of the mind to see if either principle had more substance than the other. It was out of this mindset that Pyrrho's system of Skepticism, also known as *Pyrrhonism*, was developed, with the objective being to achieve *ataraxia* (αταραξία), or tranquility, by learning to suspend judgment on their observations of their world.

The pursuit of *ataraxia* wasn't unique to the Skeptics; Epicureans also sought out *ataraxia*, albeit through the use of the pleasure principle – scaling down desires, overcoming useless fears, and seeking out intellectual pleasures. Skeptics, however, pursued *ataraxia* by avoiding any commitment to ideals whose truth was doubtful – in other words, by suspending judgment. In the words of Sextus Empiricus, who would eventually become Pyrrhonism's most important historian, "Men of talent, who were perturbed by the contradictions in things and in doubt as to which of the alternatives they ought to accept, were led on to inquire what is true in things and what false, hoping by the settlement of this question to attain quietude. The main basic principle of the Skeptic system is that of opposing to every proposition an equal proposition; for we believe that as a consequence of this we end by ceasing to dogmatize."

Pyrrho's Indian connection?

According to Diogenes Laertius, while in India, Pyrrho reportedly encountered some *gymnosophistai*, or "naked wise men," who supposedly influenced the development of Pyrrhonism, but this claim still remains a matter of controversy, partially because Diogenes never satisfactorily explained this assertion. There were, however, two philosophical schools that flourished in India that do merit attention, both are contemporaneous with Pyrrho's travels in India.

The *Lokayatas* (also known as the *Carvakas*), whose school was possibly founded by Brhaspati, taught that only sense perception could provide actual knowledge, they also presented a model of the universe that included no gods, only physical forces that interacted with each other without conscience or awareness. In citing that fermentation produces an intoxicating drink from a substance that was not intoxicating in itself, the Lokayatas argued against artificial distinctions between body and mind, claiming that the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. They also denied the existence of an afterlife; "If he who departs from the body goes to another world," they argued, "how is it that he does not return, restless for love of his kindred?" While the Lokayatas are considered naturalists, they also pursued hedonism by seeking maximum sensual pleasure while avoiding the pain that often accompanies such pleasures.

On the other hand, the *Ajnanavada*, disciples of Sanjaya Belatthiputa, practiced a suspension of judgment that appears similar to that of the Pyrrhoneans. Sanjaya rejected all competing theories of metaphysics, believing it was better to do so rather than adopt one questionable system over another. To Sanjaya, questions concerning theology, morality, and the afterlife were all beyond verification. He encouraged his followers to attain and preserve mental tranquility, similar to Pyrrho's pursuit of *ataraxia*. (The name *Ajnanavada* has been translated into English both as *Agnostics* and as *Skeptics*.) The *Ajnanavada* also refused to answer speculative questions directly; such a practice caused them to be criticized as "eel-wrigglers" in the Buddhist *Brahmajala Sutra* for their perceived indecision.

The jury is still out as to whether Pyrrho knew of the existence either or both of these schools, or if they influenced his teachings in any way.

Next month: In addition to further exploration of Pyrrhonism, we will discuss the Academics, including Arcillaus,

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