

ASPIRATIONALISM IN PYRRHO'S PROJECT OF LIVING SUSPENSIVELY

Brian Ribeiro

University of Tennessee, Chattanooga
Email: brianribeiro@hotmail.com

Abstract: Pyrrho of Elis is reported to have held that, given the nature of things, we ought to be *adoxastous* (without opinion); yet living free of all opinions may seem to be a psychological impossibility. That is the interpretive puzzle I wish to address. Drawing on a well-known passage from Diogenes Laertius' "Life of Pyrrho," I argue that Pyrrho's view that we ought to live suspensively should be understood as an aspirationalist project of self-transformation.

Keywords: Pyrrho, Aristocles passage, *adoxastous*, aspirationalism

The [Greek] skeptics doubted *everything*, but it was not a finished result; on the contrary; it was life's task to keep on doubting despite all the inveiglements of cognition. Therefore, in a certain sense they never finished, because to their very last moment there was a possibility of going astray. (Kierkegaard 1985, 262)¹

1 Introduction

Early modern and contemporary forms of epistemological skepticism tend to be almost exclusively focused on questions of justification and knowledge, asking, e.g., do we know, or have a justified belief, that the external world exists? In other words, given that we do in fact *believe* that the external world exists, is this belief justified (or known)? While such questions could lead us to take up a critical attitude toward our beliefs—if we decide our beliefs are not justified (or do not amount to knowledge)—the general tendency is to assume that the beliefs themselves will remain intact.

Within the ancient skeptical traditions, however, this assumption was not automatically made. Thus, within both the Academic and Pyrrhonian traditions there were skeptics who advocated practicing global *epochē* (suspension of judgment). And yet living entirely without belief may seem to be psychologically impossible for human beings. So what could these skeptics have been proposing? One way to resolve this puzzle—viz., that some ancient skeptics claimed to live without beliefs and yet doing so seems to be psychologically impossible—is to

¹ Kierkegaard held that the ancient Greek skeptics viewed doubt as active and as something constantly in need of renewal by will/intention: Thus to *doubt everything*—and to live suspensively—was a project “never finished,” rather than something achieved once and for all. (See also Kierkegaard 1985, 81-85, 170-171.) Kierkegaard's perceptive reading of Greek skepticism represents one kind of suggestive starting point for the aspirationalist reading of Pyrrho which I develop herein.

argue that the ancient skeptics in question viewed a state of perfect *epochē* as an aspirational ideal.² In this paper I investigate the question whether Pyrrho of Elis can be understood in this aspirationalist way.

In section 1 I outline the central scholarly debate over the interpretation of Pyrrho's view, and I stress an important point of agreement between the two sides of the dispute, viz. that all parties agree that in the text widely agreed to provide the best evidence concerning Pyrrho's view, Pyrrho says that we should be *adoxastous* (without opinion). Thus, as I will put it, Pyrrho adopts the project of living suspensively. Next, in section 2 I analyze a familiar but perplexing passage from Diogenes Laertius' "Life of Pyrrho" by considering several available interpretations of it and then suggesting one of my own. I will argue that Pyrrho seems to understand his project of living suspensively in an *aspirationalist* way, meaning that he strives to self-consciously engage in a sustained process of self-transformation ("stripping off"—as he says—"the human being"). Finally, in section 3 I return again to the scholarly dispute from section 1, not with the intention of resolving it, but instead to offer portraits of *two* possible Pyrrhos, with *each* portrait reflecting the main interpretive points I will defend here and such that, when taken *together*, these two portraits address *both* sides of the interpretive dispute from section 1.

2 Was Pyrrho a Skeptic?

The text of Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* contains a "Life of Pyrrho" (DL 9.61-108)³ from which we can extract a few details about the life of Pyrrho of Elis, who is thought to have lived approximately 365-360 BCE to approximately 275-270 BCE,⁴ dying near the age of 90 (DL 9.62). Before turning to philosophy, Pyrrho was a painter, and after he became a philosopher he traveled to India with the expedition of Alexander the Great (DL 9.61).⁵ Like Socrates, he actively practiced his philosophical views, but did not write about them, though (like Socrates) he had followers who did report some of his views, the most well-known of whom was Timon of Phlius (DL 9.102).⁶ The writings of Timon (c. 325-235 BCE)—whom Sextus labels as Pyrrho's "spokesman" (*M* 1.53)—constitute one of the key sources of evidence relating to Pyrrho's views and way of life, though

² See Ribeiro 2021, Chapter 3 ("Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonism as Aspirational"), which is a revised and expanded version of Ribeiro 2002 and which develops an aspirationalist interpretation of Sextus Empiricus and—in a short Postscript (2021, 63-65)—defends an aspirationalist reading of Cicero as well. The aspirationalist reading of Cicero which I briefly propose in Ribeiro 2021 has more recently been given a full-scale defense in Ribeiro Forthcoming. While an aspirationalist reading of Pyrrho is not developed in Ribeiro 2021, it is briefly suggested as a possibility in the footnotes: see Ribeiro 2021, 61-62n.26 and 65n.30. (Casey Perin has also recently endorsed an aspirationalist reading of Sextus; see his 2020, 248n.27.)

³ On DL 9, see Barnes 1992 and the studies collected in Vogt 2015.

⁴ These are the approximate dates suggested by Bett 2000, 1. Similar dates are suggested by Thorsrud 2009, 17 and Perin 2018, 24.

⁵ On the length of Pyrrho's journey with Alexander and his traveling companions, see Clayman 2009, 25-27. This expedition to India—where Pyrrho encountered the gymnosophists (naked wise men) and the Magi (DL 9.61)—has generated speculation over the years concerning some possible Indian influence on Pyrrho's views. An early version of this hypothesis can be found in Flintoff 1980; a more recent exploration of this possibility is Beckwith 2015. For a critical review of the Indian-influence hypothesis, see Bett 2000, 169-178.

⁶ Sextus Empiricus reports (*M* 1.281-282) that Pyrrho wrote a poem to Alexander the Great, who rewarded Pyrrho for it with ten thousand gold pieces, though this poem, if it existed, has not survived.

unfortunately some are lost entirely and the others survive only in a fragmented state.⁷

Given that Pyrrho himself left no philosophical writings, and that the writings of his most notable follower survive fragmentarily and are partially constituted by satirical writing (Timon's *Silloi*), and that a large portion of the *testimonia* relating to Pyrrho's views are from much later sources, the project of attempting to reconstruct what Pyrrho thought is vexed.⁸ To complicate matters further, the text which is generally thought to provide the best evidence concerning Pyrrho's own views—viz., a passage in the *Praeparatio evangelica* of Eusebius (who lived mid-3rd–mid-4th c. CE) which contains a quotation of a passage from a work by the Aristotelian philosopher Aristocles which, in turn, reports upon a passage from a work by Timon—is an interpretively-difficult text of which scholars have offered two quite distinct interpretations.⁹

It is not possible to offer any single translation of this key passage as an entry point to the dispute, since any given translation will itself already embody the key choices which head us toward one or the other of the two opposed readings.¹⁰ In light of this, I will instead attempt to describe or narrate the passage, as neutrally as possible, focusing on its question-and-answer structure, and pointing out where the crucial lines of contention are. In the passage at issue, we are told that Pyrrho offered a summary of his view as the conjunction of three answers to these three questions: “[F]irst, what are things like in their nature? Second, in what way ought we to be disposed toward them? And, finally, what will be the result for those who are so disposed?”¹¹ In answer to the first question, Pyrrho is said to have held that things are equally *adiaphora*, *astathmēta*, and *anepikrita*. Here the divergent readings split. The central interpretive question is whether these terms should be read *epistemologically*—as something like undifferentiable, unmeasurable, and indeterminable, respectively—or whether they should instead be read *metaphysically*—as something like indifferent, unstable, and indeterminate.¹² The epistemological reading takes Pyrrho to be describing our cognitive relation to objects, whereas the metaphysical reading takes Pyrrho to be describing the objects themselves. Each reading has had many able defenders.¹³ I do not intend to enter

⁷ Diogenes Laertius includes a “Life of Timon” (DL 9.109-116) immediately following his account of Pyrrho. For a detailed treatment of Timon, about whom I will have nothing substantive to say, see Clayman 2009.

⁸ All of the *testimonia* relating to Pyrrho are collected in Decleva Caizzi 2020, which provides the original texts in Greek and Latin, along with an Italian translation by Decleva Caizzi and an English translation by Mauro Bonazzi and David Sedley. I will refer to this as DC and will cite the texts as they are numbered, e.g. “T53.”

⁹ The passage in question (Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* XIV.18.1-5) is text T53 in DC 2020 (= LS II: p. 5, text 1F; = Chiesara 2001: pp. 20-21, F4.1-5). (Since this passage from Eusebius purports to *quote* from Aristocles, it is commonly referred to as the “Aristocles passage” and I will follow suit.) *Why* does this passage provide the best available evidence relating to what Pyrrho's own views were? See Bett 2000, 6-11, 14-15, which provides a careful survey of the arguments supporting this claim of textual importance for T53. The claim that this passage provides good evidence concerning Pyrrho's own views is very widely accepted, but for a dissenting opinion, see Brunschwig 1994. See also Green 2017, 336-338 for some methodological remarks about how best to approach the passage.

¹⁰ So says Bett 2000, 15; Perin 2018, 25 does make an attempt to offer a neutral translation. See also Thorsrud 2009, 19-20.

¹¹ Following Perin's translation (2018, 25), which does not depart from Bett's (2000, 16) in anything of significance.

¹² These two trios of suggestions come from Bett 2000, 16 and 19. Perin offers very similar interpretive alternatives: *adiaphora*: indistinguishable/indifferent; *astathmēta*: unmeasurable/unstable; and *anepikrita*: indeterminable/indeterminate (2018, 25). (See also Thorsrud 2009, 19 for very similar suggestions.)

¹³ Bett 2000 is still the only book-length treatment of Pyrrho available in English and as such will receive careful attention in the pages to follow. Bett 2000, Chapter 1 offers a clear and fair-minded discussion of the debate and also provides readers with references to defenses of the epistemological reading (2000, 21 n.14) and defenses of the metaphysical reading (2000, 44 n.56). Bett himself defends the latter view.

the fray. This is for several reasons, but I need only mention one: I am primarily interested in Pyrrho's attempt to practice suspension of judgment and in how his attempt to do so leads him into a project of self-transformation. As we will see below, in answering the second question from the Aristocles passage, Pyrrho says we should be *adoxastous* (without opinion). Thus, *regardless of which reading one takes to be correct*—epistemological or metaphysical—*all parties* must (and in fact do) agree that Pyrrho proposed to live without opinion. Thus, for present purposes, instead of attempting to decide this dispute, I will instead focus on Pyrrho-the-suspendive. This will enable me to explore the path I wish to explore without needing to settle this seemingly intractable scholarly dispute.¹⁴

Let's now consider the other two questions from the Aristocles passage: "Second, in what way ought we to be disposed toward [things]? And, finally, what will be the result for those who are so disposed?" Pyrrho's answer to the second question addresses what our attitude or disposition should be, given his answer to the first question. He offers us another trio: we should be *adoxastous*, *aklineis*, and *akradantous*. Bett (2000, 16, 29) and Perin (2018, 25) both translate these as without opinions, without inclinations, and without wavering.¹⁵ What seems to be proposed is, as Bett puts it, a "wholly unopinionated attitude" which is "indeed astonishing" (2000, 38). I would certainly agree. Rather than trying to pile up other *testimonia*, many of them admittedly much later, I want to consider the status and implications of the "wholly unopinionated attitude" Pyrrho is reported to have proposed (according to Eusebius quoting Aristocles reporting on a text from Timon). Given that all things are equally *adiaphora*, *astathmēta*, and *anepikrita*, Pyrrho says that we must be *adoxastous* and thus we will be practicing what later skeptics like Sextus referred to as *epochē* (suspension of judgment). But how could any human being actually do so? Isn't living *adoxastōs* psychologically impossible? Before we turn to that question, which will be the focus of section 2 below, let me briefly state Pyrrho's answer to the third question, which asks what the result(s) will be for those who are disposed in the way the specified by the answer to the second question: Pyrrho says that the result(s) will be, first, *aphasia* (speechlessness¹⁶ or perhaps non-assertion¹⁷) and then *ataraxia* (freedom from disturbance).¹⁸ That

Chiesara 2001 also defends the metaphysical view: see 92-102, where she discusses the issue. Likewise, see Lee 2010, 25-26. Three more recent discussions of the debate are Thorsrud 2009, 17-35, Svavarsson 2010, and Green 2017, each of which defends a version of the epistemological reading. See also Perin 2018, which presents the debate without taking a side.

¹⁴ Before leaving the dispute aside, however, I will note that Bett seems to me to overplay his hand in titling the first chapter of Bett 2000 "Pyrrho the *Non-Sceptic*" (my emphasis). Even on the metaphysical reading, Pyrrho should still be categorized as a *kind* of skeptic, though *not* one of the later Pyrrhonian stripe. After all, Pyrrho's 'indeterminacy thesis' (2000, 29), while dogmatic, has radical skeptical consequences, as Bett rightly concedes (2000, 43). And it is quite possible to have a view with radical skeptical consequences that nonetheless rests upon dogmatically-accepted premises, provided that those premises are not taken to fall within the scope of one's skepticism. (Arguments for external world skepticism generally work that way.) So it seems to me that, even if the metaphysical reading is correct, that would not *ipso facto* show Pyrrho was *not* some kind of skeptic, but rather is consistent with the view that he was a skeptic in a sense other than the sense associated with the traditional view of him (*viz.*, a view that associates him strongly with later Pyrrhonian skepticism). I will return to this again in section 4.

¹⁵ Thorsrud 2009, 19 offers "unopinionated, uncommitted and unwavering," as do Bonazzi and Sedley (see T53 in DC 2020, 143).

¹⁶ See Bett 2000, 37-38.

¹⁷ See Green 2017, 339-340.

¹⁸ For discussion of Pyrrho's answer to this third question (which will not be further considered here), see Bett 2000, 37-39.

second result, *ataraxia*, is retained as a crucial part of the skeptic's *telos* in the later Pyrrhonian tradition.¹⁹

3 Pyrrho's Aspirationalism: Interpreting DL 9.66

In the previous section, in considering Pyrrho's second answer concerning what our disposition should be, we asked a question of our own: If Pyrrho says we should be *adoxastous*, is it actually possible for a human being to be so? Diogenes Laertius' "Life of Pyrrho" reports a number of stories illustrating Pyrrho's variously successful attempts to live his suspensive (*adoxastous*) way of life. We need not take all these stories as reliable factual accounts, but they do serve to dramatize the challenge of living suspensively. Some of the stories tell of suspensive "successes," as when Pyrrho passes by his teacher Anaxarchus who was stuck in a ditch without helping him out it (DL 9.63) or when Pyrrho was said to take no notice of traffic or cliffs' edges (DL 9.62). But other stories report suspensive failures, as when Pyrrho loses his temper on his sister's behalf or shows fear when rushed by a dog (DL 9.66).²⁰ In response to these latter cases, Pyrrho is reported to have offered the following reply:

When a cur rushed at him and terrified him, he answered his critic that it was not easy entirely to strip oneself of human weakness; but one should strive with all one's might against facts, by deeds if possible, and if not, in word. (DL 9.66)²¹

This passage reports Pyrrho's self-transformative project as involving the attempt to "strip oneself of human weakness." Though the Greek here, *ekdunai ton anthrōpon*, is more literally "stripping off the human being."²² Aside from literal translation, what could this mean? In particular, what is it that's being *resisted*?

Thorsrud (2009, 32) thinks what is being resisted is "the very human tendency to evaluate things as genuinely good or bad. This tendency is most likely to surface when danger looms." This seems on the right track to me, but at the same time overly limited. Judgments—cognitive commitments—do imperil one's emotional-control and *ataraxia*. This is why the Aristocles passage (from section 1 above) tells us that Pyrrho proposed to live "without opinions," and that certainly includes the kinds of evaluative judgments that Thorsrud alludes to, but it also includes much more, including judgments based on the senses.²³

Lévy (2010, 90) says that Pyrrho "sought to 'strip off humanity'—in other words, not to correct the errors in knowledge, but to get rid of the project of knowing," though I am not sure that I understand his meaning. His claim might be read as saying that Pyrrho rejected *the project of gathering knowledge* by suspending judgment, but Lévy goes on to say that the concept of suspension of judgment was "absent from the original Pyrrhonism [of Pyrrho]" (ibid.). But this is not exactly correct: while the specific term *epochē* is not attested in the Aristocles passage or in the verse fragments of Timon, the Aristocles passage explicitly tells us that Pyrrho

¹⁹ See Sextus, *PH* 1.25-26, according to which the skeptic's *epochē* leads to "tranquillity in matters of opinion" and *metriopatheia* (moderation of one's *pathē*) "in matters forced upon us" (Annas and Barnes trans.). (See also Bett 2000, 37, 39.)

²⁰ For some reflections on assessing the reliability of these stories, see Bett 200, Chapter 2, esp. 63-70, 83.

²¹ Hicks translation. (On the translation of this passage, see also notes 22 and 30 below.)

²² See Bett 2019, 148. Thorsrud 2009, 32 suggests "strip off one's humanity." Two separate sources make the report about Pyrrho, the dog, and "stripping off the human being": see DL 9.66 (= T15 A in DC 2020) and Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* XIV.18.26 (= T15 B in DC 2020).

²³ Thorsrud's reading may have Sextus in mind, as Sextus does seem to lay special emphasis, regarding the attainment of *ataraxia*, on avoiding evaluative judgements: see *PH* 1.27 and 3.235-237.

held we should be *adoxastous*.²⁴ Another way to understand Lévy's claim is to read it as suggesting that Pyrrho sought to reject the project of epistemological theorizing.²⁵ This, of course, would be correct, but again too limited: Pyrrho proposed to live without opinions, not just without *philosophical/theoretical* opinions.

Lastly, Bett (2019, 148) says that Pyrrho is attempting to resist his "normal, engaged human reactions to things." This might even amount, Bett says, to the project of "deliberately ridding oneself of the kind of robust self that . . . the skeptic of Sextus' model also seems to lack" (ibid.). One's robust self is connected to one's "core commitments," and Pyrrho's stance represents a withdrawal from any such "core commitments" (ibid.). But as with the interpretations of Thorsrud and Lévy above, I think that this reading of *ekdunai ton anthrōpon* is, while perhaps partially correct, nonetheless incomplete.

All three of these interpretations can plausibly be understood as suggesting that Pyrrho advocated suspending judgment on some particular matters: evaluative judgments (Thorsrud), epistemological theories (Lévy), or "core commitments" (Bett). In each case my response has been the same: Yes, Pyrrho advocated suspending judgment about *those specific matters*, because Pyrrho advocated suspending judgment *in general*. If Pyrrho proposes to be(come) *adoxastous*, then *a fortiori* he will seek to avoid opinions on evaluations *and* epistemological theories *and* "core commitments" *and so on*.

So, as should already be apparent, I think the most natural interpretation of Pyrrho's struggle as it is depicted in DL 9.66 must connect the difficulty of "stripping off the human being" with laying aside one's strong inborn urges to judge and opine. If things are unknowable—which *both* readings of *Preparatio evangelica* XIV.18.1-5 entail, though for *different reasons*—and if we propose, therefore, to suspend judgment, this will be a very tall order.²⁶ No matter how urgently one desires to live suspensively, one is bound to slip, due to human weakness. One is bound to sometimes form judgments and sometimes take one's perceptions as veridical revelations of reality and to sometimes react emotively to such perceptions.²⁷ It will be hard to resist such natural human reactions, but it appears that Pyrrho proposed to make a project of resisting them. Such a self-transformation, from automatic-judger to suspensive-contemplative, might very naturally be put in terms of "stripping off the human being."

For comparison, consider Cicero, a later skeptic and an avowed devotee of the suspensive way of life, who confessed to human weakness in sometimes opining,

²⁴ Svaarsson 2010, 48 points out that this term (*adoxastous*) in the Aristocles passage constitutes an important link to later Pyrrhonian views. (And how could one be *adoxastous* without thereby practicing *epochē*?)

²⁵ Lévy says that the debates between the Stoics and the New Academy concerning "the mechanism of knowledge [...] did not interest Pyrrho" (2010, 90), so I believe Lévy does mean to suggest that Pyrrho rejects the project of epistemological theorizing.

²⁶ Though his primary focus is on Sextus, not Pyrrho, Burnyeat's classic paper "Can the Skeptic Live His Scepticism?" (reprinted in Burnyeat and Frede 1997) remains a stimulating discussion of his title's question regarding the attempt to live suspensively. Burnyeat does briefly address Pyrrho specifically: see 1997, 34-36. (The 1997 collective volume I've cited here also contains other papers by Burnyeat, Barnes, and Frede on the same topic.)

²⁷ Thus while it is true—as Bett points out (2000, 65-66)—that Pyrrho experiences lapses in his *apatheia* (freedom from emotion) and his *ataraxia* (freedom from disturbance) in the "failure" episodes from DL 9.66, those lapses are the direct causal results of his lapse in *epochē*. Cf. Bett 2000, 73 on the verse fragments of Timon related to Pyrrho: "The main message is that the source of other people's trouble is their holding of opinions and their engaging in theoretical inquiry; Pyrrho achieves his extraordinary degree of tranquility through not holding any opinions and refraining from theorizing." Bett goes on to say he sees "little direct connection" between the message in Timon's verse fragments and the Pyrrho anecdotes in DL (2000, 75), but as I've explained at the start of this note, the connection seems obvious to me. The causal connection between being *adoxastous* and experiencing *ataraxia* is even made explicit in the Aristocles passage discussed in section 1 above (*Praeparatio evangelica* XIV.18.1-5).

despite his best efforts to resist opinion-formation (see esp. *Acad.* 2.66). Cicero says that he agrees with Clitomachus, who said that “Carneades had accomplished an almost Herculean labour in that he had driven assent—i.e., opinion and rashness—from our minds, as one would drive out a wild and savage monster” (*Acad.* 2.108).²⁸ Cicero himself, on the other hand, had not yet accomplished that almost Herculean labour. Indeed, Cicero’s case is the clearest ancient case of which I am aware of what I refer to as *aspirationalist radical skepticism*, meaning that one is normatively inclined to embrace radical skepticism and live suspensively, yet one nonetheless finds it a struggle to live up to one’s own rational ideal, and so one therefore embraces suspensive living as a *rational ideal* that one *aspires toward*.²⁹ Thus, on my own interpretation of DL 9.66, Pyrrho tells us that he aspires to live suspensively and uncommittedly; indeed he says that “one should strive with all one’s might” to achieve that state.³⁰

Anyone who embraces the project of attempting to live suspensively is faced with the obvious psychological difficulty of resisting the siren song of opinion. As a result, some, like Cicero, as we have just seen, confess to human weakness and occasional opining and yet refuse to surrender their ideals but instead *actively seek to resist their urges to opine*. That is to say, they *aspire* to live suspensively. Now one might wonder just how much aspiring and resisting are necessary to render the proceedings something of a genuine attempt at self-transformation, and in reply my general view on that has always been that the important thing is the sincerity of one’s efforts, rather than the extent of one’s achievements, and even the efforts themselves might be inconstant and there could be occasional back-sliding.³¹ But if such effort itself seems crucial to an aspirationalist approach, then Pyrrho may be uniquely interesting as a suspensive aspirationalist, because—at least as our sources depict him—he seems to have had an almost-monastic desire to live out his philosophy by living suspensively.³² Some contemporary scholars have proposed to look for other examples of people who actually, or allegedly, *do* live suspensively by turning to certain forms of Buddhism practice.³³ I, on the other hand, have expressed doubts about how much such contemporary examples really prove about the ability to live in a *radically* suspensive way.³⁴ So it is interesting that Pyrrho himself, uniquely among the surviving records of ancient Greek and Roman thinkers, appears to have whole-heartedly embraced the attempt to live suspensively. It appears that Pyrrho’s success in that endeavor was at best partial, which surely comes as no surprise, and yet surely Pyrrho—as Bett notes (2000, 83)—must have nonetheless made significant progress toward his ideal, doing so “to a sufficient degree to attract considerable notice,” as the records available to us attest.

²⁸ Cf. this near-Herculean praise of Carneades’ efforts to fight off assent with Timon’s praise of Pyrrho as god-like: See T61 A and T61 B in DC 2020, 145-146.

²⁹ For more on this reading of Cicero, see Ribeiro 2021, 63-65 and Ribeiro Forthcoming.

³⁰ *diagōnizesthai . . . hōs hoion te prōton men tois ergois pros ta pragmata, ei de mē, tō ge logō*, which Hicks translates, “[O]ne should strive with all one’s might against facts, by deeds if possible, and if not, by word.” Mensch 2018: “[O]ne should struggle against adversity, by deeds if at all possible, and if not, by word.” Lastly, Svavarsson 2010, 41: “[O]ne should strive as much as possible against things, first by one’s deeds, but if not thus, then by reason.” I think Svavarsson’s choice of “by reason” makes the best sense of the end of the passage. (Stephen White’s 2021 translation of DL likewise translates *tō . . . logō* here as “by reason.”)

³¹ Cf. the fascinating passage in Penelhum 1979, 267-269, where he compares the effortful project of *maintaining doxastic commitment* (e.g., as a religious believer might try to maintain her faith) with the effortful project of *resisting doxastic commitment* (e.g., as a skeptic might try to maintain her *epochē*). This passage is one of the few of which I am aware that makes any attempt to dive into the actual psychology, or even the phenomenology, of suspensive aspirationalism.

³² Cf. Sextus, *PH* 1.7 on Pyrrhonism’s eponym.

³³ See Brons 2018, which in part disputes claims made in Ribeiro 2002.

³⁴ See Ribeiro 2021, 138-141 responding to Brons 2018.

4 Reflections on Two Possible Pyrrhos

As we saw in section 1 above, there exists a seeming intractable debate concerning the proper interpretation of Pyrrho's philosophy as it is expounded in the Aristocles passage. However, since my intention has been to defend a view of Pyrrho as a suspensive aspirationalist, and since *both* of the competing interpretations are committed to accepting that Pyrrho espoused the view that we ought to be *adoxastous*, I did not enter the fray, but simply took that point of agreement in hand and moved on to consider the nature of Pyrrho's aspirationalism. And yet it might now be useful to consider how my main points about Pyrrho's suspensive aspirationalism could be understood from the respective perspectives of, on the one hand, the epistemological reading and, on the other, the metaphysical reading.

Starting with the epistemological reading, we can say that, *even read epistemically*, Pyrrho's skeptical view would not be the same as that of later Pyrrhonists like Sextus. Pyrrho's skepticism would still be quite radical, of course, but it would contain elements of what we now call negatively-dogmatic skepticism and would be anathema to Sextus for that reason. On the epistemological reading, Pyrrho asserts that things are undifferentiable, unmeasurable, and indeterminable, and *for this reason* we must be without opinions, without inclinations, and without wavering, which results in speechless and then tranquility. In putting things this way, Pyrrho's skepticism seems closer to the views of some radical *Academic* skeptics, namely those who asserted that nothing is apprehensible and *due to this* we must suspend judgment.³⁵ I believe that was Cicero's own skeptical view. Thus, *if the epistemological reading is correct*, then Pyrrho's stance would be that of an aspirational radical skeptic, which is precisely Cicero's stance as well.³⁶

And what if we take the metaphysical reading? Well, once again we can say that Pyrrho's view would not be the same as that of later Pyrrhonists like Sextus. And yet Pyrrho's view would contain a strong dose of skepticism even so. On the metaphysical reading, Pyrrho says that things are indifferent, unstable, and indeterminate, and for this reason we must be without opinions, without inclinations, and without wavering, which results in speechless and then tranquility. By making *definite claims* about the nature of things themselves, Pyrrho is being dogmatic in making those claims. And his dogmatism would concern a *metaphysical* view, whereas radical Academic skepticism—when understood as a form of negatively-dogmatic skepticism—dogmatizes instead about an *epistemological* view (*viz.*, the thesis that nothing is apprehensible). So, on the metaphysical reading, Pyrrho's view is not that of the radical Academics *or* the later Pyrrhonians: it would rather be a unique view (though perhaps one shared with his followers, like Timon). Would this unique view be one we should call *skeptical*? Bett titles the first chapter of his 2000 book "Pyrrho the Non-Sceptic" and thereby seems to give his answer. But is Bett correct? Naturally, if "skeptical" is just stipulated to mean later-Pyrrhonian-skeptical, then I would have to agree that Pyrrho is no "skeptical."³⁷ But on *that stipulation*, neither Carneades nor Cicero would count as

³⁵ Sextus *PH* 1.1-4, 226 expresses this negative-dogmatic reading of (some of) the Academics. Cf. Frede 1997, 146-147 on Cicero's "dogmatic scepticism." It is clear that Sextan Pyrrhonism is an attempt to avoid the philosophical conundrums that such a view lands one in, just as one might expect in a later, and perhaps more sophisticated, form of skepticism.

³⁶ At least this is so if the reading of Cicero briefly outlined in Ribeiro 2021, 63-65 and more fully defended in Ribeiro Forthcoming is correct. (Strangely, Cicero seems to have held a very different view of Pyrrho, regarding which see Bett 2000, 102-105.)

³⁷ I think, in fact, this *is* the stipulated meaning of "skeptical" that Bett is working with: see his 2000, 14, 189. As Vogt 2015, 8 puts it, "It is the merit of Richard Bett's *Pyrrho, his Antecedents, and his Legacy* to have pointed out that Pyrrho may not have been a skeptic *in Sextus' sense of the term*" (my emphasis). Be that as

skeptics either, which is surely the wrong result.³⁸ Consider further that Bett sees clearly that Pyrrho's 'indeterminacy thesis' (2000, 29) directly entails a strong form of skepticism (2000, 43).³⁹ Here is part of what Bett says (2000, 43):

Pyrrho's view, even on the metaphysical interpretation, entails that we know nothing. We have no knowledge, that is, of things as they are presented to us through our sensations—of the relatively stable, distinct and determinate material objects that we ordinarily [...] take to make up the real world.

I suppose intuitions might differ, but that sounds like a form of skepticism to me, though perhaps an unorthodox form. It has some affinity to the kind of external world skepticism that generates so much heat among the early modern philosophers like Descartes, Berkeley, Hume, and Kant. Arguments for external world skepticism tend to rest upon dogmatically-accepted epistemic views, though those views (premises) were not thought to fall within the scope of the skeptical conclusion which they generate (since the skeptical conclusion concerns empirical knowledge).

So granting that, on the metaphysical reading, Pyrrho has some dogmatic commitments—as he *also* does, for that matter, on the epistemological reading—it nonetheless seems that his dogmatic commitments do yield skeptical implications. Further, since both readings acknowledge the central place of being *adoxastous* in Pyrrho's view, it would seem clear that Pyrrho himself, *even on the metaphysical reading*, was also *aware* of these skeptical implications.⁴⁰ This in fact explains why I could pursue my questions about Pyrrho's suspensive aspirationalism without needing to resolve the scholarly dispute over the Aristocles passage: the reason, put simply, is that on either reading, it is highly plausible to say Pyrrho was some kind of skeptic, though, again, not the same kind as Sextus, and on the metaphysical reading, not the same kind as Cicero or Sextus: But Cicero and Sextus do not exhaust all the offerings in the vast halls of the great skeptical mansion.

5 Concluding Remarks

it may, my view aligns with Vogt's (2015, 3-14): the kind of view Bett ascribes to Pyrrho—which Vogt refers to under the useful label "Metaphysically Inclined Skepticism"—still counts as a form of skepticism.

³⁸ Sextus' own highly polemical adoption of the term *skeptikos* is intended, of course, to separate out his own view from any other views, no matter how similar they might be—see, e.g., *PH* 1.223-234—but surely that is not the right way for us to speak or classify views as historians of philosophy *today*. If that is what Bett is doing in refusing to call Pyrrho a "skeptic," then his view must *also* be that none of the Academics counted as "skeptics" either and hence that many, many contemporary scholarly and collective volumes devoted to those Academics have been titled incorrectly.

³⁹ Perin 2018, 33 also notes this, though briefly.

⁴⁰ If this still doesn't seem like it would be a form of skepticism to you, let me offer an analogy. Consider a thinker who embraces a correspondence theory of truth and who combines that with the further *dogmatically-held* linguistic thesis L: The terms of natural human languages (e.g., "red," "round," "friend," etc.) are too coarse to map onto states of affairs in a sufficiently tight way, and as a consequence of this none of the statements involving those terms ever count as being "true" (or "false") because human statements lack the determinacy necessary to legitimate any truth-value at all. Suppose further that this thinker, as a *direct result of his dogmatic commitments to the correspondence theory and L*, advocates that we be *adoxastous*. Would this not be seen as some form of linguistically-based skepticism? The view entails that we have no knowledge, because we cannot even have true beliefs, and it recommends that we therefore reject belief and suspend judgment. Yes, this would be a *dogmatically-rooted* form of skepticism, but even on the epistemological reading of Pyrrho his skepticism is *rooted dogmatically* in the epistemic thesis that things are undifferentiable, unmeasurable, and indeterminable. And, yes, any such *dogmatically-rooted* skepticism raises the question, about its dogmatic roots, "And how do you know *that*?" But the point here is not whether a metaphysically-rooted, or linguistically-rooted, skepticism is the best skeptical view to hold, but only whether it would *count* as a skeptical position, and I don't see why it would not.

I have argued that Pyrrho aspired to live suspendively (section 2) and that we can (and should) accept this understanding of Pyrrho regardless of whether the Aristocles passage is read epistemologically or metaphysically (as outlined in section 1). While I declined to take up arms in that particular interpretive dispute, I did dispute one of the contentions of Bett 2000: Bett, defending the metaphysical reading of the Aristocles passage, sometimes appears to be saying that, thus interpreted, Pyrrho is *not* a skeptic; if that is an accurate statement of his view, I must disagree.⁴¹ While Pyrrho's view differs from Sextus' on *both* the metaphysical *and* the epistemological reading of the Aristocles passage, that would not suffice to show that *either* of the two possible Pyrrhos (from section 3) were not skeptics: *Whichever* of the two possible Pyrrhos was the *actual Pyrrho* was a *skeptic*—though neither was a skeptic of the same kind as Sextus.⁴²

References

- ANNAS, Julia & BARNES, Jonathan, trans. 2000. *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [PH 1-3].
- BARNES, Jonathan. 1992. "Diogenes Laertius IX 1-116: The Philosophy of Pyrrhonism," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II.36.6: 4241-4301.
- BECKWITH, Christopher. 2015. *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- BETT, Richard. 2000. *Pyrrho, His Antecedents, and His Legacy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- BETT, Richard. 2019. *How to Be a Pyrrhonist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- BETT, Richard, trans. 2018. *Sextus Empiricus: Against Those in the Disciplines*. [= M 1-6]. New York: Oxford University Press.
- BRONS, Robin. (2018) "Life without Belief: A Madhyamaka Defense of the Livability of Pyrrhonism," *Philosophy East and West* 68: 329-351.
- BRUNSCHWIG, Jacques. 1994. "Once Again on Eusebius on Aristocles on Timon on Pyrrho." In Brunschwig's *Papers in Hellenistic Philosophy*, trans. J. Lloyd, 190-211. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- BURNYEAT, Myles. 1997. "Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?" In M. Burnyeat & M. Frede (eds.), *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*, 25-57. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- CHIESARA, Maria Lorenza. 2001. *Aristocles of Messene: Testimonies and Fragments*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- CICERO. 2006. *On Academic Scepticism*. Trans. C. Brittain. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

⁴¹ Despite giving Chapter 1 of his 2000 the provocative title "Pyrrho the Non-Sceptic," Bett might be read most charitably as holding only that Pyrrho is a *non-Sextan*, and if so, then we agree. However, other scholars seem to have taken up the idea, perhaps influenced by Bett 2000, that the metaphysical reading delivers a non-skeptical Pyrrho. Cf. Perin 2018, which has a section titled "Pyrrho the Metaphysician" explicating the metaphysical reading and another section titled "Pyrrho the Skeptic" which covers the epistemological reading; in the latter section Perin says that "[o]n the metaphysical reading . . . *there is little sense in which Pyrrho is a skeptic*" (2018, 33, my emphasis). As I have argued, that's just not true.

⁴² I would like to express my thanks to Scott Aikin, Mason Marshall, and Plínio Junqueira Smith for discussion, written comments, and other forms of assistance they provided, all of which helped me to improve this paper.

- CLAYMAN, Dee. 2009. *Timon of Phlius*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- DECLEVA CAIZZI, Fernanda. 2020. *Pirroniana*. Milano: LED.
- DIOGENES LAERTIUS. 1925. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 2 vols. Trans. R. D. Hicks. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- DIOGENES LAERTIUS. 2018. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Trans. Pamela Mensch; ed. James Miller. New York: Oxford University Press.
- DIOGENES LAERTIUS. 2021. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Ed. & trans. Stephen White. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- FLINTOFF, E. 1980. "Pyrrho and India", *Phronesis* 25: 88-108.
- GREEN, Jerry. 2017. "Was Pyrrho a Pyrrhonian?", *Apeiron* 50: 335-365.
- FREDE, Michael. 1997. "The Skeptic's Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge." In M. Burnyeat & M. Frede (eds.), *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*, 127-151. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- KIERKEGAARD, Søren. 1985. *Philosophical Fragments, Johannes Climacus*. Trans. Howard V. Hong & Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- LEE, Mi-Kyoung. 2010. "Antecedents in Early Greek Philosophy." In R. Bett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, 13-35. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LÉVY, Carlos. 2010. "The Sceptical Academy: Decline and Afterlife." In R. Bett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, 81-104. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LONG, A. A. & SEDLEY, D. N., trans. 1987. *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- PENELHUM, Terence. 1979. "Hume's Skepticism and the *Dialogues*." In D. F. Norton, N. Capaldi, & W. L. Robison (eds.), *McGill Hume Studies*, 253-278. San Diego: Austin Hill Press.
- PERIN, Casey. 2018. "Pyrrho and Timon." In D. Machuca & B. Reed (eds.), *Skepticism from Antiquity to the Present*, 24-35. London: Bloomsbury.
- PERIN, Casey. 2020. "Scepticism and Self-Detachment," *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 10: 235-255.
- RIBEIRO, Brian. 2002. "Is Pyrrhonism Psychologically Possible?", *Ancient Philosophy* 22: 319-331.
- RIBEIRO, Brian. 2021. *Sextus, Montaigne, Hume: Pyrrhonizers*. Leiden: Brill.
- RIBEIRO, Brian. Forthcoming. "Cicero's Aspirationalist Radical Skepticism in the *Academica*", *History of Philosophy & Logical Analysis*.
- SVAVARSON, Svavar. 2010. "Pyrrho and Early Pyrrhonism." In R. Bett (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, 36-57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- THORSRUD, Harald. 2009. *Ancient Scepticism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- VOGT, Katja, ed. 2015. *Pyrrhonian Skepticism in Diogenes Laertius*. Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck.