

What is *Ataraxia* Like, and Why do Some Schools, but not Others, Aim for it?

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1. The Pyrrhonian skeptics saw *ataraxia* – tranquility, or freedom from worry – as a key component of life’s aim or *telos*. There is room for debate about how important this was, or should have been, in the totality of their thinking¹. But it is clear that, from the beginning of Pyrrhonism with Pyrrho himself to Sextus Empiricus near its end, *ataraxia* is taken to be the central practical benefit of their outlook². One might also wonder whether a skeptic is really in a position to claim anything as the *telos*³. But Sextus, the only Pyrrhonist who explicitly speaks in these terms, makes clear that he is not claiming that *ataraxia* (along with *metriopatheia*, “moderate reaction”, to things such as hunger and pain, over which we have no control) is what all humans beings should, or naturally do, aim for – which is how statements of the *telos* in Greek philosophy are normally framed; he is simply talking about what he and his skeptical friends do in fact aim for, and that does not land him with any dubious theoretical commitments (*PH* 1.25).

The Pyrrhonists are not, of course, the only ones to make *ataraxia* an important element – arguably the *most* important element – in the *telos*. In this they are joined by the Epicureans. Other schools had a place for *ataraxia* in their practical thinking; but in these other schools it occupied a subordinate or ancillary position, with something else serving as the *telos* or highest good. I have two goals in this paper. One is to see whether we can clarify

¹ For the view that *ataraxia* is not a central feature of Pyrrhonism, see Machuca 2006; for the view that Sextus makes more of it than he is entitled to, see Bett 2019a and 2019b.

² The evidence in Sextus Empiricus is discussed below. For Pyrrho the main evidence is a passage of the Peripatetic Aristocles of Messene, quoted in Eusebius’ *Praeparatio evangelica* (14.18.1-5, passage 1F in Long and Sedley 1987), which summarizes an account of Pyrrho’s general philosophical attitudes by his disciple Timon of Phlius; the result of adopting these attitudes is said to be *ataraxia*. For Aenesidemus, who started the later movement claiming inspiration from Pyrrho, we do not have the word *ataraxia* specifically attested, except in a generic comment by Diogenes Laertius, that “those around Timon and Aenesidemus” (meaning, presumably, Pyrrhonists in general) say that *ataraxia* follows suspension of judgment like a shadow (9.107). But the summary of Aenesidemus’ book *Pyrrhonist Discourses* by Photius speaks of the “continual torments” to which other philosophers are subject, and contrasts this with the happiness of the Pyrrhonist (*Bibliotheca* 169b24-7, 71C2-3 in Long and Sedley 1987). In what may be a confused reference to the same point, Diogenes also reports Aenesidemus as saying that the *objects* placed in opposition to one another by the Pyrrhonist “are found to have much inconsistency and disturbance [*tarachén*]” (9.78).

³ On this see Moller 2004, Grgic 2006.

how the Pyrrhonists and the Epicureans conceive of *ataraxia*, and to try to compare their ways of thinking about this topic. The other – and this will occupy most of the paper – is to see whether some explanation can be found for the division between those philosophers who elevated *ataraxia* to the rank of a component in the *telos*, and those who did not; can we account, philosophically or otherwise, for the difference in this respect between the Epicureans and the Pyrrhonists, on the one hand, and everyone else on the other? Because pursuing the latter goal will also help to advance the former, I will tackle this first.

An obvious difference between the Pyrrhonists and the Epicureans is that the Epicureans are not skeptics; they think they know a great deal about how the world works, and are therefore, in Sextus' terminology, dogmatists. Some have felt that there is nonetheless a certain proximity between Pyrrhonism and Epicureanism; and it does look as if Sextus, at least on some occasions, has a kind of sympathy for Epicureanism that is different from his attitude to other dogmatic schools⁴. But the fact remains – and Sextus does not hesitate to point out (e.g., *M* 1.5, 6.4) – that the Epicureans are dogmatists and the Pyrrhonists are not. And since their common orientation towards *ataraxia* is itself a major source of the sense of proximity between them, this only makes more pressing the question why just these two privilege *ataraxia* and others do not. In tackling this question, it will be easiest to focus first on comparisons between the Epicureans and other dogmatic philosophies. The skeptics will therefore fade from the scene for some time. But eventually I will bring them back into the picture.

2. By the time we focus on the Pyrrhonists again, I will have touched on several philosophers or schools of philosophy. But to get our issues into sharp focus, the best place to start, I think, is a comparison between the Epicureans and the Stoics; not just because they were contemporary rivals, but also because the Stoics do allow a place for *ataraxia* in their thinking, albeit in the subordinate role I mentioned just now. The term *ataraxia* and cognates do not appear to have been used in earlier Stoicism – at least, not to describe an attitude of which the Stoics approved; but they are relatively common in Epictetus, as are their Latin equivalents in Seneca, and they occasionally figure in Marcus Aurelius. As Gisela Striker has pointed out⁵, this is not meant to signify what the Stoic is ultimately aiming for, but to characterize the

⁴ On the latter point, see Marchand 2013, in Marchand and Verde 2013; the volume as a whole is useful on the general question of the relations between Pyrrhonism and Epicureanism.

⁵ Striker 1990, 99; in thinking about this topic, I have learned a lot from this article.

state of mind of the person who has achieved that aim – namely, the person who is living the life “in agreement with nature” or “according to virtue”.

Now, the terminology may have shifted, and perhaps the earlier Stoics could not stomach the use of a term that loomed so large in the thinking of their rivals the Epicureans; on the other hand, it is not clear that there is any significant shift in doctrine from the earlier period. We have a verse fragment of Cleanthes that begins “You ask me what the good is like? Well, listen”, and continues with an eight-line string of epithets (Clement, *Protrepticus* 67.2=*SVF* I.557). There are some thirty epithets in all, and of these five or six would seem to be related to, or components of, what the Epicureans of his own time, and the Stoics of later times, called *ataraxia*. The good is called fearless (*aphobon*), without grief (*alupon*), pain-free (*anôdunon*), well-pleased (*euareston*), safe (*asphales*), and gentle (*praion*); the last is perhaps a little outside the cluster of concepts captured by the others, but I am reminded of the closing sentence of Diogenes Laertius’ life of Pyrrho, where we are told that some skeptics had an alternative name for the end, calling it *praiotês*, gentleness, instead of *ataraxia* (9.108). What does it mean to say that the good is fearless, without grief, and so on? Since Stoic ontology does not admit the independent existence of abstract entities such as “the good”, this can only be a way of describing, again, the *person* who is good. Such a person enjoys the states designated by these terms and the many others on the list; some of the terms I have not mentioned refer to qualities of character (for example, just, pious, friendly), but the ones I have singled out here refer to states of mind. The good person, then, is blessed in Cleanthes’ view with (among many other things) something close to *ataraxia*, and this is important enough to be worth celebrating.

So the Stoics make the virtuous life, which is the life in which you are properly attuned both to your own nature and the nature of the world, the highest good. They think that if you can attain this, the state you will enjoy will non-accidentally be one that includes *ataraxia* or something close to it, and this is a welcome outcome. But it is not *because* of the *ataraxia* (or the like) that is a component of this state that you should aim for it; you should aim for it because it is the state that constitutes the fulfillment of your nature – the state that, in a very literal sense, you are naturally designed to attain. The Epicureans, on the other hand, think of pleasure as the highest good. And they distinguish between active or “kinetic” pleasures and static or “katastematic” pleasures, which consist in absence of pain – the latter being much the more important of the two; at one point Epicurus actually says that it is for the sake of this that they do everything (*Letter to Menoceus*, DL 10.128). *Ataraxia* is simply the mental aspect of katastematic pleasure, the bodily aspect being *aponia* (DL 10.136). And so, given that, like

most Greek philosophers, they privilege the mental over the physical (DL 10.137), it is really *ataraxia*, more than anything else, that they think we should ultimately be aiming for. Now, can we say anything helpful that will account for this major difference in the value assigned to *ataraxia* in the two schools?

It is fair to say that there is a considerable difference in what we might call the *flavor* of Stoicism and of Epicureanism, although it is not easy to specify clearly what this amounts to. An initial thought might be that this can be put in terms of optimism versus pessimism, with Epicureanism's acceptance of *ataraxia* as the goal of life understood as a sign of a pessimistic worldview, and Stoicism's embrace of something higher, as we might think of it, a sign of an optimistic worldview. But although, as we shall see, this is not entirely off target, it misstates the situation in important ways. For one thing, Epicurus is far from pessimistic about our ability to attain the goal. So long as we can find our way to the correct understanding of the world, and especially of the fact that it is not controlled by gods – a task that he seems to see as well within human capability – *ataraxia* seems to follow fairly easily, in his view. And concerning our ability to maintain our *ataraxia* in the face of, for example, physical pain, he appears naively, even wildly optimistic, repeatedly claiming that pain is, if intense, of short duration, and if of long duration, mild (KD IV, VS 4, DL 10.133 (*Letter to Menoecus*)), and writing on his deathbed that even his intense pain is outweighed by the happy memories of his conversations with the addressee Idomeneus (DL 10.22). And on the other side, it is not so clear that we should regard Stoicism as optimistic. For although the condition of the Stoic sage is one of extraordinary attainment and invulnerability, the number of people who have actually achieved this condition is vanishingly small. And, what makes this much worse, there is nothing between virtue and vice, so that those of us who are not sages – that is to say, virtually all the humans who have ever lived – are fools and sinners, losers in the quest to fulfil our nature as human beings. Plutarch cites the Stoics as saying that you are just as drowned if you are immediately below the surface as if you are a hundred fathoms down (*Comm. not.* 1063A-B), the point being that anything short of complete success is still unqualified failure. It is hardly surprising that Alexander of Aphrodisias, an Aristotelian, would say that the Stoic position makes the human being “the most wretched animal of all, having vice and madness assigned to him as part of his nature” (*Fat.* 199,20-22).

So I prefer not to frame the contrast in terms of optimism versus pessimism. Yet there remains, I think, a sense that the Epicureans, in aiming for *ataraxia*, are settling for something second-best, and that the Stoics are aiming for something higher. Another way one might try to express this is in terms of the meaning of life: *ataraxia* is what one will be left with if one

thinks that life has no inherent meaning, whereas if one thinks there is a meaning to life, that will furnish one with higher goals and the motivation to strive for them. The Epicureans would then exemplify the former route and the Stoics the latter. Yet while this too is not without merit, one has to be very careful with talk about “the meaning of life”. It is a distinctively modern term – there is no ancient Greek or Latin phrase that can be readily viewed as a counterpart – and while it sometimes occurs in contexts where someone is wondering whether life comes with a meaning ready-made or built in, as it were, it is more often used to characterize a distinctively modern preoccupation, namely, a search by an individual for a way of life that will be found meaningful *for that individual*, irrespective of whether that way of life will come across as meaningful for others. By contrast, the ideals set out by both the Stoics and the Epicureans are ideals that they are recommending for human beings in general, not just for themselves. If there is a distinction to be drawn between the Stoics and the Epicureans that appeals to the notion of meaningfulness, I think it is a distinction that is not about the meaning of life as we tend to think of it – that is, as a question to be approached introspectively and on the basis of personal experience – but about the nature of the world and the place of human beings in it.

Let me try a third formulation, then. Some philosophies portray the world, including our place in it, as fundamentally making sense, and others do not. Now, if you think that the world fundamentally makes sense, *ataraxia*, an untroubled state of mind, is not likely to strike you as of primary importance (even if you may welcome it if it comes); you will be more interested in understanding your place in the world and exemplifying or living up to it as best you can. *Ataraxia* will appeal, as the ultimate object of human pursuit, at most to those who do *not* have a vision of the world and our place in it as fundamentally making sense. The Stoics belong to the first category and the Epicureans to the second. Now, the crucial question at this point will be, what do I mean by “fundamentally making sense”, and why do I say that the Epicureans do not think of the world and human life in this way?

The Epicureans do, of course, think that the world is understandable. It is understandable by means of the atomic theory. All the occurrences in the world, including in us, can be understood as due to the movements of atoms in the void and the combinations, interactions and separations of atoms that result from those movements; although they readily admit that the details are not known, and may never be known, in many cases, they are entirely satisfied that everything works according to the basic tenets of the atomic theory. So they seem just as confident that they have made sense of the world with their fundamental tenets as the Stoics, or Aristotle, are of having made sense of it with theirs. What, then, is missing?

The answer, I think, must center on the words “including our place in it”. If the movements of atoms, and they alone, are responsible for *everything*, then human life is in a sense accidental. Of course, given the precise movements of atoms that did in fact occur, human beings did come about at a particular time in this particular world. But there was no guarantee that those precise movements should have occurred, especially since some of the atomic movements are “swerves”, purely random movements that are not part of any causal order; hence there was no guarantee that human life, or any life, should have developed when and where it did, or in the way that it did. Humans do not, then, enjoy any privileged or assured position in the world; their existence is just a product of the particular sequences of atomic movements that happen to have occurred in our region of the universe. Another way one might put this is that there is a sense in which, for the Epicureans, human beings are not really at home in the world. First, as beings with consciousness we are something of an anomaly in a universe that consists at bottom in nothing more than the movements of atoms. Of course, we are not the only beings of whom this is true (the Epicureans are clear that other animals besides ourselves have sensation), but we are the only ones who can reflect upon this fact. Then again, the world is not designed for our convenience; in fact, it is not designed at all, but in any case, the way it has developed is entirely unrelated to our needs. And although we have managed to survive and sometimes even flourished (unlike the monsters with no feet or hands, or with limbs that could not move independently (Lucr. 5.837-44) which the infinite number of atomic movements must at some time have produced), there are many aspects of the world that are clearly unhelpful to us: deserts, freezing cold, swamps, wild animals, disease, etc. As Lucretius says in this context, no wonder new-born babies cry; they have a lot to cry about, given what lies in their future (Lucr. 5.200-34).

This, then, is the kind of thing I mean when I say that the world, including our place in it, does not fundamentally make sense, in the Epicurean picture. By contrast, in Stoicism the world is providentially designed, and throughout pervaded, by a rational divine being, who has thought through the place of human beings in the world, as well as the place of everything else, and made everything fit together in the best possible way. And we ourselves have the potential, if we can attain the goal of living “in agreement with nature” or “according to virtue”, of being on a level with the divine (Plut., *Comm. not.* 1076A). While in the Stoic picture, too, there will be many aspects of the world that we are not in a position to understand, the basic conviction is that rationality is built into the cosmos, and that our own position in the cosmos is an important part of that rational plan. It was perhaps Cleanthes, in his *Hymn to Zeus*, who evoked this sense of order and rationality as much as any Stoic. Still, for the Stoics

in general, it is very clear that the world and our place in it do fundamentally make sense. For the Epicureans it is quite different: in place of a rational plan, we have the movements of atoms, mostly caused but occasionally random, and at any rate not under the direction of any central force, let alone an intelligent one, with the nature and the very existence of human life nothing more than a contingent product of these atomic movements.

Now, for the Stoics it is also clear that an answer to the question of what we are supposed to be doing is built into the structure of the world. We are supposed to be striving towards the goal that is given to us by nature, and that goal is not going to be anything as unambitious as freeing ourselves from worry; rather, it is attuning ourselves to the nature of the world and living accordingly, which will also be the fulfillment of our own natures. It is only those who are alienated from the world around them – to use another perhaps risky piece of contemporary language, but one whose applicability to the Epicureans I hope I have justified – who can be expected to find something like *ataraxia* attractive as an ideal; this is what you may go for if you fail to find anything better on offer. And this fits the Epicureans: on their view of the universe, nothing is “on offer” as a human ideal except what we can find from the resources of our own positive and negative sensations.

There is a little more to add, on each side of this major philosophical divide. On one side, it is time to bring in Aristotle. I do not wish to give the impression that one has to believe in a divine plan in order to believe that the world and our place in it fundamentally make sense. Aristotle does not believe in a divine plan. There is a god in Aristotle, but it is a god who does not stoop to anything as mundane as organizing the world. Nevertheless, the world is ordered, in part through its relation to god as the ultimate cause of motion. And we humans not only naturally desire to know, as Aristotle says in the first sentence of the *Metaphysics*, but also have the capacity to *succeed* in understanding the world, in all its order and wonder.

Moreover, achieving this understanding is an important part of what it is that we humans are naturally supposed to do. For Aristotle is very clear that things can occur *for the sake of some end* even if no conscious being, divine or otherwise, *decided* that they should be that way (*Phys.* 196b17-19). And he is equally clear that the phenomenon of things occurring for the sake of some end is pervasive in nature, including at the level of the entire range of activities of a typical member of a given species; broadly speaking, what a cow’s activities, for example, are “for the sake of” is the attainment or exemplification of a cow’s form or essence. And this applies to humans just as much as to other species. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (I.7) Aristotle approaches the question of what the human good is by considering a human being’s “function” or “job” (*ergon*). The human function, he concludes, is the activity of the distinctively

human rational soul; and the human good then turns out to be simply, engaging in that activity at a really high level – or, as he puts it, “activity of soul conforming to excellence” (1098a16-17). What this involves in detail, he spells out in the rest of the work. There are difficult questions about how to relate what appear to be two distinct and even incompatible accounts, one stressing a life engaged in human society and the other stressing theoretical contemplation or understanding, which is said to assimilate us to the divine. What is not in doubt, however, is that this excellent psychic activity, including at least a good measure of theoretical activity, is what we are *by nature* fitted to do, so that the more we attain it, the more successful we are as human beings. For Aristotle, then, as for the Stoics, the world and our place in it fundamentally make sense. Even though god has not said so, there is a goal that our natures direct us towards, and that goal, if properly attended to, will keep us busy. Given this, *ataraxia* is not and ought not to be high on our list of priorities because, as I put it just now, something better is on offer.

At this point an objection may be raised. Is there not also a goal that our natures direct us towards in Epicureanism – namely, pleasure, one crucial component of which is *ataraxia*? And does this not cast doubt on the entire philosophical divide I have attempted to construct?

It is true that Epicurus speaks of some desires as being natural (*Letter to Menoeceus* 127, *KD* 29), and of our pursuit of pleasure and security as being due to their natural congeniality to us (*to phusin echein oikeian*, *Letter to Menoeceus* 129; *to tês phuseôs oikeion*, *KD* 7). But our “natures”, in this sense, are just the collection of reactions to the world that we happen to be subject to, given our atomic makeup, and independently of any pressures from society. Cicero has his Epicurean representative in the *De Finibus*, Torquatus, emphasize that babies seek pleasure and avoid pain as soon as they are born. The inference is that this is a *natural* orientation because it occurs prior to any societal influence, and the arbiter of what is or is not in tune with our nature is declared to be whatever our unbiased senses (including the capacity for pleasure and pain) detect (*Fin.* 1.30). What we do not find in Epicureanism is any talk of an essential human nature, which sets aims for us that are inherently ours, such as is made possible by the notion of form in Aristotle or by the providential divine plan in Stoicism. There is no inbuilt human “function” or “job” in Epicureanism; there are just the likes and dislikes that flow from our sensory experience, which is itself a product of the way (as a matter of cosmic accident) we are constructed atomically⁶. So I stick with the idea that there is a philosophical divide, with Epicurus on the opposite side from Aristotle and the Stoics. “Nature”, at least as applied to human beings and how they should act, is a much less robust

⁶ For a good statement of this point, see Long and Sedley 1987, vol. I, 122.

notion in Epicureanism than in these other philosophers; Epicurus is driven to the resources of our positive and negative sensations, as I put it, because he does not think there is “something better on offer”, dictated to us by the world and/or our own nature and thus serving to guide our lives.

However, for those on this side of the divide, it is not obvious that *ataraxia* in particular must be what one settles on as an ideal. Like the Epicureans, the Cyrenaics do not have a view according to which the world and our place in it fundamentally make sense; in fact, since they think that we can have knowledge only of our *pathê* – that is, of the ways we are affected – and not of the things that cause them, they do not have any view about the nature of the world and our place in it. They too, therefore, are driven to characterize an ideal in terms of something purely psychological. They choose pleasure, but their conception of pleasure is rather different from that of the Epicureans; they do not privilege *ataraxia* or “katastematic” pleasure in general, but bodily pleasure of the kind the Epicureans would call “kinetic” (DL 2.87). What, then, might incline someone to pick *ataraxia*, rather than, say, this other kind of pleasure as the end?

The answer, I suggest, is that *ataraxia*, freedom from worry, will appeal to you as an end if you think that there is potentially a great deal about which to be worried. Cultivating *ataraxia* is a way of playing it safe, and this will seem attractive if being severely troubled seems to you a likely alternative. And the Epicureans do in fact see severe trouble as an ever-present risk⁷. I have already mentioned that, on their view, the world is not a place in which human beings are particularly at home. But an even more pressing risk of trouble for them is the one that lurks in the ordinary opinions that they encounter all around them. People who believe in the gods of traditional Greek religion, they think, are subject to constant worry about these gods harming them; all kinds of occurrences in the natural world, such as thunder and lightning, floods or disease, are interpreted as signs of malicious divine intent, and this will lead one to be in a state of permanent fear and anxiety. This theme is perhaps most apparent in Lucretius, with his tirades about the pernicious effects of *religio*. But it is also easy to find in Epicurus. Near the start of the *Letter to Pythocles* Epicurus says that the whole point of learning about meteorological and celestial phenomena is *ataraxia* (DL 10.85); and near the end of the *Letter to Herodotus* he says that the greatest disturbance (*tarachos*, the opposite of *ataraxia*) comes to humans from thinking that such phenomena are the intentional actions of divine beings (DL 10.81). To overcome this trouble, we need to understand the real nature of

⁷ Nietzsche seems to me to capture this aspect of Epicurus’ own thinking nicely in *The Gay Science* 1.45 (Nietzsche 2001).

the universe, which includes understanding that the gods have nothing to do with any of these occurrences (in fact, they have no effect on us at all, except perhaps when they appear to us in dreams and visions), as well as understanding what death is really like. If one can do this, one will be free from trouble; if not, one will be in a bad way. A sequence of three *Kuriai Doxai* sums it up well⁸: “(11) If our suspicions about heavenly phenomena and about death did not trouble us at all and were never anything to us ... then we would have no need of natural science. (12) It was impossible for someone ignorant about the nature of the universe but still suspicious about the subjects of the myths to dissolve his feelings of fear about the most important matters. So it was impossible to receive unmixed pleasures without knowing natural science. (13) It was useless to obtain security from men while the things above and below the earth and, generally, the things in the unbounded remained as objects of suspicion”.

Let me sum up the results of this discussion. A philosophy according to which the world and our place in it fundamentally make sense is not likely to view *ataraxia* as something worth striving for in its own right; such a philosophy will have higher things on which to set its sights. The cases I have focused on, Stoicism and Aristotelianism, both include a strong element of natural teleology, and it may be that the wording I have emphasized – “the world and our place in it fundamentally make sense” – is just another way of saying “the world is governed by teleology”. I am not entirely sure about this, but even if so, I think it was still worth spelling out what it is about such views that make them unlikely to rank *ataraxia* highly. By contrast, a philosophy that does place *ataraxia* at the highest rank will be one that satisfies both of the following conditions: 1) it does *not* conceive of the world and our place in it as fundamentally making sense and 2) it sees worry or anxiety, the opposite of *ataraxia*, as a serious and constant danger should one fail to cultivate the appropriate attitudes. So far, Epicureanism is the only philosophy I have used to illustrate this claim. I can now finally reintroduce Pyrrhonist skepticism, or more particularly the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus, which also considers *ataraxia* a key element in the *telos*, and attempt to show that it fits my thesis equally well⁹.

As we noted in introducing the Cyrenaics, one can lack a view according to which the world and our place in it fundamentally make sense either by holding a view (as I have suggested the Epicureans do) in which these things do *not* fundamentally make sense, or by not having a view about these things at all. The Pyrrhonists, who avoid views about the nature of the world in general, will clearly fall into the latter category. And this means that they do

⁸ I borrow the translation of Inwood and Gerson 1997 (passage I-5).

⁹ The evidence is too exiguous to allow us to explore this issue with respect to earlier Pyrrhonists – but see n.12.

satisfy the first of my two conditions. Now, what of the second: does Sextus Empiricus see worry or anxiety as an ever-present danger?

The answer, perhaps surprisingly, is yes. At any rate, whenever Sextus considers why skepticism brings *ataraxia*, the emphasis is on the troubles that beset those who are not skeptics. There seem to be two somewhat different reasons why this is so. According to one story, the skeptic starts out as someone who is troubled by not being able to determine the truth about the world, and who hopes to do so, thus becoming released from this trouble. This is not in fact what happens; instead, the longer one tries, the more one continues to find opposing conceptions of things equally persuasive, and as a result one finds oneself suspending judgment. But then it turns out that this very process of suspending judgment leads to the *ataraxia* one was seeking in the first place; one therefore gets released from the trouble that initially afflicted one, although via an unexpected route (*PH* 1.12, 26, 28-9). On this picture, the alternative to skepticism, and its attendant *ataraxia*, is continued trouble – at least for those who are not so self-satisfied as to think they have actually discovered the truth¹⁰. And those people will surely fall victim to trouble according to the other story (which is much more clearly delineated in Sextus' text). The emphasis here is especially on beliefs to the effect that certain things are really, or by nature, good and others bad. If one has beliefs of this kind, one will be desperately troubled by the need to get or keep the good things and to avoid or rid oneself of the bad things. The skeptic by definition lacks any such beliefs, and so is free of trouble; but other people, both philosophers and regular folk, are beset by the troubles attending these beliefs (*PH* 1.27-8, 30, 3.235-8, *M* 11.110-67).

There is room for much discussion about how these two accounts are supposed to relate to one another, and about the plausibility of each taken individually¹¹. In addition, the first account, at least, seems applicable only to theoretically minded people. But then, as I said,

¹⁰ Sextus does not actually talk about those who fail to follow the skeptic's route, as described in the passages just cited. But he presumably does not think that *everyone* who was in the initial state of trouble, wishing for knowledge but being painfully aware of not having it, either becomes a skeptic or takes themselves to achieve knowledge; there must be some people who remain unsure but still wish for knowledge, and for these people, the original trouble surely persists.

¹¹ An interesting recent discussion of this issue is Machuca 2019; see also Taylor 2014. Both explain the first source of disturbance by means of the second: the person engaged in unresolved inquiry is troubled *because* of believing that discovery of the truth would be good by nature, and that failure to have achieved this is bad by nature. The shortcoming of this explanation is that it does not explain why suspension of judgment about anything other than good and bad is required for *ataraxia* (a problem acknowledged by Machuca, although his solution – that the skeptic is interested in inquiry quite apart from its effect of *ataraxia* (212-13) – seems to me not to address the issue). Machuca distinguishes a third source of disturbance besides the two I have identified – non-evaluative beliefs; but this seems to me not really distinct from my first. The person who is troubled by not having been able to decide among the conflicting appearances no doubt has a number of beliefs, along with an uncomfortable sense that these beliefs may not be anchored in the nature of things; the beliefs and the unresolved inquiry are both parts of a single package. And when Sextus speaks of *ataraxia* following from a generalized suspension of judgment (*PH* 1.26, 29), he can quite well be read as referring to this person's withdrawal from *both* the attempt to decide among the appearances *and* to their withdrawal from the beliefs that they hold in this state of uncomfortable uncertainty.

Sextus, unlike the Stoics and Epicureans, does not purport to be laying down a *telos* that applies to all human beings (which, as a skeptic, he could not consistently do); he is quite explicit that his *telos*, which includes *ataraxia*, is what the skeptics in fact aim for, not what human beings in general should or naturally do aim for (*PH* 1.25). My point here is simply that Sextus does seem to be alert to a strong danger of worry or anxiety¹², and hence he seems to fit the second of my two conditions for placing *ataraxia* among the things one values the most, as well as the first.

3. I hope, therefore, to have shed some light on why the Pyrrhonists and the Epicureans, despite being different from one another in many ways, give the highest rank to *ataraxia*, unlike any other Greco-Roman philosophies. I turn now to my other question: what is it like to be in a state of *ataraxia*? Is the *character* of the *ataraxia* celebrated by the Epicureans and by the Pyrrhonists the same, or are there significant differences in how they conceive or describe it? There is rather more on this subject in Epicurus and Lucretius than in Sextus¹³, but at least some comparisons will be possible.

I have suggested that *ataraxia*, freedom from worry, appeals to those who think there is otherwise a lot to worry about. And an important part of the portrayal of *ataraxia* in both Epicureanism and Pyrrhonism is the sense of relief at not being subject to the troubles afflicting other people. This is particularly salient in Sextus, who, whenever he explicitly discusses the skeptic's *ataraxia*, invariably places it in contrast with the emotional turmoil to which the dogmatist (and, on one occasion, the ordinary person, *PH* 1.30) is subject because of being convinced that some things are in reality good and others bad (*PH* 1.25-30, 3.235-8, *M* 11.110-67). As for his other explanation for the skeptic's *ataraxia*, this is framed, as we saw, as a release from the troubles experienced by those who are eager to discover the truth (with a view to achieving, precisely, *ataraxia*) but are aware of being far from that goal (*PH* 1.12, 26); those who suspend judgment and give up on the search attain *ataraxia*, and the clear implication is that those who do not manage to pursue that program – who continue to aspire to knowledge and to be aware of not having attained it – remain in a state of anxiety. But Epicurus, too, speaks of the favored state of mind as including “absence of fear about what is going to happen”, and adds that for the person who has achieved this state, “the entire storm

¹² The passage of Photius on Aenesidemus that I cited in n.2 above possibly indicates that this attitude goes back to an earlier phase of the Pyrrhonist tradition. Marchand 2018, ch.1 also detects a pessimistic or tragic aspect to the goal of *ataraxia* in Pyrrho and Timon (see especially 54-5), again because of its orientation towards avoidance of trouble. I am not entirely sure about this, but it would fit nicely with my case.

¹³ As before, I concentrate mainly on these three figures – it is much easier to work with complete texts – but there will be a few exceptions.

of the soul is let go” (*Letter to Menoeceus* 122, 128). There is much more of the same in Lucretius, who even takes it to another level, going on at some length about the pleasure that comes from seeing others who are still troubled and comparing oneself with them (2.1-19). He is a little embarrassed about this, emphasizing that it is not the troubles of others that are themselves the source of pleasure; the pleasure comes, rather, from the keen awareness of how much better off one is oneself (2.3-4).

Despite this passage, which seems to border on a kind of *Schadenfreude*, another attitude that the Epicureans and Sextus seem broadly to share is a general goodwill towards others. In Epicurus himself it is quite clear that friendship is a crucial component of *ataraxia*. He says that it is much the greatest contributor to “the blessedness of one’s whole life” (*KD* 27, cf. *VS* 52), and he stresses that, even though we may willingly make great sacrifices for our friends (*VS* 56), the value of friendship derives, at bottom, from the security that comes from knowing that others, in turn, will look out for us when we need it (*KD* 28, *VS* 34). Indeed, these things are connected, because the feeling of security goes both ways: each friend must have the same confidence about the other, or it will not work (*VS* 57). There are difficult questions about how far this ultimately self-interested motivation can ground genuine friendship¹⁴. But there is no doubt about Epicurus’ commitment to friendship as integral to *ataraxia*. And Diogenes Laertius’ eulogy of Epicurus, emphasizing his kindness (*philanthrôpia*) towards everyone he encountered and the harmonious atmosphere of the philosophical community he founded (10.9-10), surely points to an important aspect of the Epicurean ideal, whether or not it has a sound historical basis.

Sextus has much less to say about interpersonal relations. But there are a couple of hints that point in a similar direction. I noted earlier that Diogenes tells us of an alternative specification of the skeptics’ *telos*: not *ataraxia*, but *praotês*, “gentleness” (9.108). I think we can read this not as a dissenting opinion, but as another term intended to capture the general attitude the skeptics cultivated. And Sextus seems to support this when, at the beginning of *Against Those in the Disciplines*, he characterizes the Pyrrhonists’ approach (by contrast with the Epicureans’) to the disciplines he is going to examine. He mentions in passing that the Pyrrhonists do not care what most people think about this, and adds “Not that this is due to hostility towards anyone – a vice of that sort is far from their gentleness” (*M* 1.6). He does not say anything to connect this “gentleness” explicitly with skeptical *ataraxia*; but he treats it as a habitual Pyrrhonist attitude, and hence as at least fit to coexist with *ataraxia*. In addition, in a well-known passage at the very end of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus says that the skeptic is

¹⁴ Evans 2004 is good on this.

“philanthropic” (*philanthrôpos*) and wishes to “cure” (*iasthai*) the dogmatists of their afflictions (3.280). One can question whether this is really an essential part of the Pyrrhonist mindset¹⁵. But the term *philanthrôpia* has a long history in Greek medical literature¹⁶, and Sextus, who was himself a doctor, is clearly placing himself in that tradition, offering a psychic remedy in the same spirit of benevolence towards humanity that the medical profession claimed for itself in general.

Sextus, of course, was by no means the only one to adopt this therapeutic model, and this brings us back to the Epicureans. We can find this model in Lucretius (4.10-25); it seems to be pervasive in Philodemus¹⁷; and it also appeared in the opening description of his aims on Diogenes of Oenoanda’s enormous Epicurean inscription (fr.3 in Smith 1992). The desire to convert as many people as possible, for their own good, might be inferred, even aside from the medical model, from Lucretius’ pose as a didactic poet, and from Diogenes’ choice of such a public mode of presentation. But the medical model provides a sort of additional confirmation of this, stating on its face, as it were, “I want to help you”. The medical model need not be limited to those who treat *ataraxia* as part of the *telos*¹⁸. But for those who do, it shows that philanthropic motivations belong squarely within the untroubled attitude to life that they aim for.

One apparent difference between Epicurus and Sextus is in their levels of enthusiasm for *ataraxia*, or in the extravagance of the claims they make for it. Epicurus speaks of how easy it is to attain “the limit of good things” (*Letter to Menoeceus* 133) and declares that the Epicurean’s life is “perfect” (*pantelê*, *KD* 20); at the close of the *Letter to Menoeceus*, he even says that such a person will “live like a god among humans” (135). And, as we saw earlier, in the words that Diogenes says he penned on his deathbed (10.22), it is made clear that the correct, untroubled mental attitude can counteract even intense physical suffering. Sextus seems considerably less optimistic. On the last point, he concedes that the skeptic is not immune from the troubles that come from things over which we have no control – hunger, physical pain and the like (*PH* 1.29); and while he says that belief that these things are in reality bad would constitute an extra source of trouble from which the skeptic is free (*PH* 1.30, 3.235-6, *M* 11.159), he nowhere suggests that the skeptic’s mental *ataraxia* can itself lessen the suffering from these other sources. He does at one point claim that suspending judgment about all matters of opinion leads to “the most complete happiness” (*M* 11.160). But he cannot really

¹⁵ This point is developed in Machuca 2006.

¹⁶ See Edelstein 1967, Voelke 1990.

¹⁷ An excellent guide to this is Tsouna 2007.

¹⁸ On this, see Nussbaum 1994.

mean that, because he immediately goes on to talk about the genuine (though moderate) disturbances caused by the things we cannot control. In general the strongest recommendation he makes for skeptical *ataraxia* is that it frees us from “intense” (*suntonos*) mental attitudes (*PH* 1.28, *M* 11.112-13, 121-33). It is interesting that intense joy is apparently to be avoided as much as intense anxiety (*M* 11.146). This looks like a much more muted, play-it-safe kind of mindset than the one praised by Epicurus.

One might wish to account for this by a further obvious difference: the Epicureans, not being skeptics, think that *ataraxia* is a genuine good, whereas the Pyrrhonists, as I have noted, carefully refrain from making any such claim. They seek *ataraxia*, and presumably they like it when they get it; but even if they succeed in this, they do not think they have achieved anything that is truly valuable. Surely this could account for the difference in tone that I have just remarked on.

There may well be something to this; but two further points might give us pause. First, the way in which, in the earliest phase of Pyrrhonism, Timon describes Pyrrho’s own tranquility seems scarcely less extreme than Epicurus’ language:

This, Pyrrho, my heart longs to hear
However you, a man, conduct yourself with the greatest ease and tranquility
Always heedless and uniformly unmoved
Paying no attention to the whirls of sweet-voiced wisdom.
You alone lead humans in the manner of the god
Who revolves back and forth around the whole earth
Showing the flaming circle of his well-turned sphere¹⁹.

Again we have the comparison with a god (in this case, a specific god, the sun), alongside the suggestion in the second line that Pyrrho’s level of tranquility is truly exceptional for a human being. There is no concession, as in Sextus, to the fact of inevitable suffering, and this fits with one of the anecdotes told of Pyrrho in Diogenes Laertius – that he did not even frown when subjected to (ancient) surgery (9.67). So the image of *ataraxia* in early Pyrrhonism, just like the image of *ataraxia* in Epicurus, seems to be of a tranquility that transcends normal human limitations.

The second point is that Epicurus himself seems to be exceptional – or at least, at the extreme end of the spectrum – within his own school in his very elevated description of the

¹⁹ This fragment is pieced together from three different sources. Diogenes Laertius 9.65 quotes lines 1, 2 and 5; Sextus quotes part of line 2 and lines 3 and 4 at *M* 11.1, and lines 5-7 at *M* 1.305. This is passage 2D in Long and Sedley 1987.

delights of *ataraxia*. It is possible to find in Lucretius the idea that Epicureans can “lead a life worthy of the gods” (3.322). But when he compares Epicurus to a god (3.15, 5.8), or calls him superhuman and compares him with the sun (3.1043-4), this is always for the character of his mind and his ability to penetrate to the truth about the universe; it is never *ataraxia* itself, either Epicurus’ or anyone else’s, that gets these accolades. Besides, recall the point from Lucretius that I mentioned earlier, about babies having good reason to cry immediately after being born; one could hardly imagine Epicurus saying anything like this. Although the Epicurean worldview as such implies that, as I put it, humans are not really at home in the world, Epicurus seems considerably less bothered by this than Lucretius is. Then again, Diogenes of Oenoanda says at one point “Then truly the life of the gods will transfer to humans” (fr. 56, I.4-6 in Smith 1992, 22S in Long and Sedley 1987). But this refers to a counterfactual future “golden age” that would be possible if everyone could achieve something of which, in fact, not everyone is capable; what exactly this is, the fragmentary state of the inscription does not allow us to see, but presumably it is a level of wisdom or virtue that would allow everyone to live harmoniously without the usual constraints of society. In the “Letter to Mother”, also on the Diogenes inscription, the author speaks of “these things that make our disposition equal to the gods and reveal us as, despite our mortality, not even lacking the imperishable and blessed nature” (fr. 125, IV.2-8 in Smith 1992). This does sound like the kind of swagger Epicurus shows in the *Letter to Menoeceus*. But since the author of the *Letter to Mother* is widely thought to be, precisely, Epicurus²⁰, this can hardly be said to count against my suggestion as to Epicurus’ exceptionally sunny attitude.

So, instead of there being a difference in kind between the Epicureans’ *ataraxia* and the Pyrrhonists’ *ataraxia*, due to the latter being skeptics and the former not being, it may instead be that, in both Epicureanism and Pyrrhonism, there is an extreme enthusiasm at the *beginning* of the movement about the level of tranquility that the philosophy can allow us to achieve, which is later tempered by further reflection and perhaps by criticism from other schools. I am not sure we are in a position to choose between these two options; and of course the differences in individual temperament of the various thinkers on either side may be a further, equally imponderable factor.

This may be about as far as we can take this topic. *Ataraxia* is a state of calm, of freedom or release from intellectual and emotional turmoil. In general terms, that is a state we can understand reasonably well, but the ancient authors do not go into great detail about what it is like to experience it. Some have suggested that a life of *ataraxia* would be profoundly

²⁰ See Smith 1992, 555-8 for discussion of this issue.

boring²¹; and indeed, it is not hard to think of other things that most of us want out of life, things that would probably be hard to obtain without sacrificing some degree of tranquility. However, I must confess that in today's increasingly crazy and uncertain world, *ataraxia* is looking to me better and better as something to cultivate and try to maintain. How far the recipes for achieving it offered by either the Epicureans or the Pyrrhonists are viable for us today is another question^{22, 23}.

Sképsis 20

²¹ Gisela Striker in particular has pressed this objection; see Striker 2004, 22, Striker 2010, 196.

²² With regard to the Pyrrhonists, this is an issue that I take up in several essays in *How to Be a Pyrrhonist*, including Bett 2019a and Bett 2019b. Several of the contributors to the symposium on my work in this volume find me too pessimistic on this topic. They may be right; in my reply to their comments, I attempt to clarify my current position.

²³ An earlier version of sections I and II of this paper was presented at Philosophy in Assos, July 2015. I thank the audience for their helpful comments, especially Monte Johnson and David Wolfsdorf.

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Sképsis 20