



Oren Hanner (ed.)

Buddhism and Scepticism

Historical, Philosophical,
and Comparative Perspectives



Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

ISSN 2190-6769

ISBN 978-3-89733-558-5 (E-Book)

ISBN 978-3-89733-518-9 (printed version)

© 2020 projekt verlag, Bochum/Freiburg

www.projektverlag.de

Cover original design by Benjamin Guzinski; Julia Wrage, Hamburg

Cover image: Manjushri from Rig Sum Gonpo (Lords of the Three Families)

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/>

Contents

Foreword by the Editors	7
Contributors	9
Acknowledgements	13
Introduction	15
<i>Oren Hanner</i>	
Some Sceptical Doubts about “Buddhist Scepticism”	21
<i>Mark Siderits</i>	
Beyond Reasonable Doubt? A Note on Dharmakīrti and Scepticism	37
<i>Vincent Eltschinger</i>	
Nāgārjuna’s Scepticism about Philosophy	55
<i>Ethan Mills</i>	
Yavanayāna: Buddhist Soteriology in the Aristocles Passage	83
<i>Georgios T. Halkias</i>	
The Evident and the Non-Evident: Buddhism through the Lens of Pyrrhonism	109
<i>Adrian Kuzminski</i>	
Scripture and Scepticism in Vasubandhu’s Exegetical Method	131
<i>Oren Hanner</i>	
Sceptical Buddhism as Provenance and Project	161
<i>James Mark Shields</i>	
Index	179

The Evident and the Non-Evident: Buddhism through the Lens of Pyrrhonism

Adrian Kuzminski

This paper offers a short synopsis of Pyrrhonism, a proposed solution to the issue of Pyrrho's connection with Indian thought, and a brief comparison of some elements of Pyrrhonism and Buddhism.¹

1.

Pyrrhonism is an unusual ancient Greek therapeutic philosophy. Pyrrho of Elis, generally recognized as its founder, was part of the entourage of philosophers who accompanied Alexander the Great on his Asian conquests, all the way to India. According to Diogenes Laertius, writing in the third century of the Common Era, Pyrrho

foregathered with the Indian Gymnosophists and with the Magi. This led him to adopt a most noble philosophy [...] taking the form of agnosticism and suspension of judgment. He denied that anything was honorable or dishonourable, just or unjust. And so, universally, he held that there is nothing really existent, but custom and convention govern human action; for no single thing is in itself any more this than that. (Diogenes Laertius, 1925, 9.61)²

As this passage and other sources suggest, Pyrrho suspended judgement, or interpretation, about the nature of our immediate experience; that is, our sensations and thoughts as they directly appear to us. Pyrrho found that the ability to suspend judgement led to *ataraxia*; namely, peace, or stillness of mind. Stripped of the interpretations that we usually give our sensations and thoughts, they turn out to have no fixed meaning, no independent existence;

¹ This paper extends my earlier work. See Kuzminski (2008) *et passim*. I would also like to thank Oren Hanner for his editorial help and advice.

² The Hicks translation (1925) has the advantage of facing Greek and English texts; a more recent, well-annotated translation without the Greek text is the 2018 translation by Pamela Mensch.

instead, they continuously fluctuate, appearing not in isolation, but variously together in one context or another.

The historical record of Pyrrhonism is a spotty one. Pyrrho himself wrote little or nothing, and the only comprehensive texts to have come down to us were written by Sextus Empiricus nearly half a millennium later. Diogenes Laertius, writing after Sextus, offers, aside from his intriguing biography of Pyrrho, a genealogy of Pyrrhonian philosophers, including Timon and Aenesidemus, among others, who, he claims, fill in the long line between Pyrrho and Sextus (Diogenes Laertius, 1925, 9.115–116). However, the paucity of surviving texts has left this tradition little more than a skeleton, a bare outline of names, subject to challenge and controversy.

It has even been argued that Pyrrho himself was not a Pyrrhonist.³ Nonetheless, his successors seemed to think otherwise. They found enough in him to acknowledge him as their founder, and thereby distinguished themselves as members of a coherent tradition in its own right. My purpose here is not to rehearse scholarly controversies, but instead to propose a reconstruction of some of the main points of Pyrrhonism, particularly as found in the texts of Sextus Empiricus, to see how Pyrrho might most plausibly have reconciled his Greek mindset with what he encountered among holy men in India, and to bring all this to bear on some basic points of Buddhism.

2.

First, we must resolve the confusion between Pyrrhonism and scepticism as we know it today. The Pyrrhonists were the only ancient philosophers who described themselves as sceptics, to be sure, but only in the original Greek sense of the term, as seekers or inquirers, not as doubters. For better or worse, the term “scepticism” in modern times has come to mean something quite different from inquiry; it now means doubting that any sort of knowledge at all is possible and believing that all inquiry is doomed to fail. Thanks to David Hume and others (even Nietzsche), the term “Pyrrhonism” has confusingly come to be used for this kind of radical scepticism, or nihilism.⁴

The ancient Pyrrhonists were not nihilists. They distinguished between things evident—our immediate thoughts and sensations, about which they

³ See Bett (2000, pp. 39–40).

⁴ See Hume (1748/1993, pp. 110–111) and Nietzsche (1888/2009–, 14[100]).

had no doubt—and things non-evident, or absent, about which doubt is possible. The Pyrrhonists scorned those who denied the possibility of any knowledge at all, such as Arcesilaus and Carneades of the Old Academy, who, like modern sceptics, believed that nothing was evident or could be known with certainty, as negative dogmatists. The Pyrrhonists also rejected the positive dogmatism of the major schools—Platonists, Aristotelians, Epicureans, Stoics, and others—all of whom believed that recalcitrant non-evident things could in fact be made evident and known. The Pyrrhonists avoided both of these extremes: they did not accept dogmatic beliefs, either positive or negative, but they did count our immediate experiences as evident.

Pyrrhonists observe that our immediate and evident objects of experience, our thoughts and sensations, are phenomena that are continuously in flux, and that—apparently without exception—they variously combine and recombine with one another into facts, or what Sextus calls *pragmata*. Appearances mean different things depending on the context—the facts—in which they appear. “Each thing,” Sextus tells us, “appears relative to a given admixture and a given composition and quantity and position.” And, “since everything is relative,” he says, “we shall suspend judgment as to what things are independently and in their nature” (Sextus Empiricus, 2000, 1.135–136). So, the significance of appearances—of what they mean to us—depends wholly on the shifting factual contexts in which they appear and disappear, along with other appearances. Therefore, nothing in itself, they say, is “any more this than that.”

Sextus, our principal source for Pyrrhonism, insists that we cannot deny the immediate objects of our experience—that is, our immediate thoughts and sensations—and that we cannot be in error about what they are. In his *Outlines of Scepticism*, Sextus writes:

Those who say that the sceptics [Pyrrhonists] reject what is apparent have not, I think, listened to what we say. [...] When we investigate whether existing things are such as they appear, we grant that they appear, and what we investigate is not what is apparent, but what is said about what is apparent—and this is different from investigating what is apparent itself. For example, it appears to us that honey sweetens [...]; but whether [...] it is actually sweet is something we investigate—and this is not what is apparent but something said about what is apparent. (Sextus Empiricus, 2000, 1.19)

Sextus points out that we accept appearances involuntarily. Think of it this way: if it is a sunny day and I go outside, and if my eyes are normal and I look up, I cannot help but see the sunny blue sky. Or this: if my hearing is

normal and I stand next to a piano that has been tuned to concert pitch, I cannot help but hear middle C if a certain key is struck. And so on for the gardenia that I smell, or the fur that I touch. And similarly, if someone says “think of your mother,” I cannot help but think of my mother, or if they say “think of the Mona Lisa,” I cannot help thinking of—either imagining or recollecting—the Mona Lisa; that is, some mental image that I have of the Mona Lisa. Appearances, which come packaged as *pragmata*, are evident, or apparent, because they are as involuntary as they are direct and immediate. They are literally forced upon us. We have no choice, Pyrrhonists say, but to suffer and endure them. We cannot help having them when we have them.

What is not apparent, by contrast, is what we can say about these experiences; that is, how we interpret *pragmata*. To interpret an experience is to imagine something about it, to take it as a sign of another experience, one which is not currently present. I might see a shimmering blur ahead in the desert. When I do, there is no mistaking the immediate visual experience of the shimmering blur that I see in the distance; only when I interpret the blur, when I take it for something else—say, for a body of water—can I make a mistake. Appearances, for the Pyrrhonists, cannot in themselves be in error; error arises only when we interpret these appearances. For any interpretation takes us from something evident to something non-evident, to something we could be wrong about.

This does not mean that our interpretations are necessarily wrong; there might in fact be water ahead in the desert. But interpretation necessarily involves a degree of uncertainty. Many signs prove to be reliable enough: Sextus gives the stock examples of smoke as a sign of fire and a scar as a sign of a wound, though, of course, even these might be wrong in some circumstances. However, for Pyrrhonists, it is never the experience itself that is wrong, but only our interpretation of it.

3.

We not only experience things evident—that is, our *pragmata*, our immediately manifest, involuntary, fluctuating sensations and thoughts—but according to Sextus, we also experience previously evident things as non-evident. We are able to notice the absence as well as the presence of appearances. I notice, for example, the absence of a student who one day fails to come to

class. Presence and absence seem to be mutually defining aspects of the immediate objects of our experience, which come and go. It seems doubtful that we can have either presence or absence without the other.

Interestingly, in *Against the Logicians*, Sextus offers us an intriguing four-fold classification of *pragmata*;⁵ that is, the facts of immediate experience (the combinations of phenomena we actually perceive). First, he tells us, we have facts which are manifestly evident: these are our immediate, involuntary thoughts and sensations, as already noted, like the blue sky we see on a sunny day. Second, we have facts which are non-evident, but only temporarily so (like the student who does not come to class). Sextus's examples of temporarily non-evident facts include thinking about the city of Athens when we are in Rome, or a fire that we cannot see, but which we imagine to exist because of smoke that we can see. Third, Sextus notes facts which he calls absolutely or, we might say, practically non-evident; that is, things which we have no way of determining, even though we can see that they could in principle be determined. Here, he gives the examples of whether the stars in the heavens and the grains of sand in the Libyan desert are odd or even in number.

Fourth and finally, and most relevant to our purposes, Sextus notes certain facts which he says are naturally or inherently non-evident; these, he describes as absences that are "everlastingly hidden away." They include notions such as God, Nature, the Void, and the Soul. Unlike facts practically or temporarily non-evident, facts inherently non-evident are things we can imagine, or think we can imagine, but which appear to have no realization as sensations. We somehow never find the Soul or the Self appearing among our sensations, as David Hume famously argued, nor do we find the Void, God, or Nature suddenly appearing among the things we sensibly experience as manifestly evident. These absences cannot be found in immediate sensory experience; they are non-facts which we project, but which remain stubbornly absent. Though we can imagine naturally non-evident things in thought, or at least imagine that we can imagine them, we find, so far, no realization of them in sensation. They are, we might say, evidently non-evident, in spite of our belief that they may or could be evident.

The student's absence is evident to me because the student had previously come to class; similarly, the absence of an even or odd number for the stars is evident to me because I can see both how to start counting the stars and

⁵ See Sextus Empiricus (1935, 2.145–158).

how it is that I cannot finish the job. But the Soul and other inherently non-evident things, according to Sextus, are experienced only as imaginings, never (yet) as sensations. My Soul consistently fails to appear to me, as Hume pointed out; it is not present to me in the way that my sensations are present to me. All we can experience of the Soul, the Pyrrhonists observe, is its absence.

Even though there is no sensible appearance of the Soul, I can nonetheless try to fill in the absence I recognize. So argues the dogmatist. Since I can recall things temporarily absent, like the student who did not come to class, why, the dogmatist asks, can I not believe that the inherently non-evident things I imagine nonetheless exist somewhere “outside” or “inside” of myself? Why not posit an actually existing Soul for myself, a kind of shadow of myself within my body, which survives my body’s death? If I can use words to signify something temporarily or practically absent—the student not in class, or the exact number of the stars—why can I not use words—such as “Soul”—to express something that is inherently non-evident, or entirely absent, but which I can nevertheless imagine, or imagine that I can imagine, existing?

Nothing prevents anyone from asserting that there is a Soul, that it is immortal, that it currently coexists with the living body, that it has certain powers, that it has a conscience, that it can do good or evil, that it was created by God, and so on, as anyone may please. And anyone can just as freely deny all that. What we cannot do, however, is verify the Soul empirically, as an actual sensation corresponding to the thought of it that I can imagine. We can only *believe* it exists, or *not*—either choice being an act of faith. However, the Pyrrhonists hold no such beliefs and make no such acts of faith. That my Soul might or might not exist, they neither affirm nor deny. They note only that we have not been able to experience it as an appearance in sensation.

All we can know about the Soul—or about similar things widely believed to exist, such as Nature, Beauty, Justice, or Art, among many others—is no more or less than that if they exist, they are inherently non-evident to us. All we can know about them, the Pyrrhonists maintain, is that as sensations, they remain absent and therefore indeterminate. It is *pragmata*, for the Pyrrhonists, which provide the only standard, or criterion, of determination; things inherently non-evident, which do not appear in sensation, remain indeterminate. This does not mean that the inherently non-evident is nothing. We cannot say that it does not exist; we can only say that it does not appear. The inherently non-evident is an absence which is not realized by any sensible

appearance we have. It is, we might say, absence itself, evident only by its contrast with such facts, or *pragmata*, as are evident to us.

The inherently non-evident, the Pyrrhonists suggest, can be understood as pure absence. Temporarily or practically non-evident things, by comparison, shape the absences they leave behind, as light shapes the shadows it casts. The student not in class is a shadow of that student, so to speak, just as a footprint in the sand is a shadow of one who has passed by. Such absences are shaped by prior *pragmata*. Insofar as they can be redeemed by later reappearing, they remain temporary (or practical) absences. However, the inherently non-evident is a wholly indeterminate absence that is not shaped by any prior presence we can find.

Our signs for the inherently non-evident lack any determinate referent. We can imagine God, or infinity, or try to do so, and we can use words and pictures to represent such imaginings, to be sure, but insofar as no independent appearances corresponding to these signs can be found, insofar as they remain unconfirmed by any referent, they remain empty of any real content to us. The only reality they can be given is a fictional one, potential at best, something that can only be believed, but not known, to be true.

Since anyone is free to believe in whatever they think is signified by their signs for inherently non-evident things, and since no one can prove that anything corresponds to those signs, conflicts and opposing views inevitably arise. With the more important beliefs—the Soul, God, History, Race, Nation, Fascism, Liberalism, Capitalism, Justice, Virtue, Christianity, Islam, Atheism, Equality, Gender, and many others—controversy and contradiction have routinely led to desperate clashes between groups of believers.

By suspending judgement about all such beliefs, about all things inherently non-evident, the Pyrrhonists reported that they found relief from conflict and thereby peace of mind, or *ataraxia*. This allowed them to follow a way of life rooted in the acceptance of uninterpreted appearances on the one hand and the indeterminate absence, or emptiness, which seems to accompany these appearances on the other.

4.

The evident and the non-evident, as presented above, can fruitfully be understood, I suggest, as a reworking in a Greek idiom of discoveries made by Pyrrho in his contacts with Indian gymnosophists and elaborated by the subsequent tradition he inspired. Diogenes is quite emphatic in stating, as we

have seen, that it was those contacts which “led him [Pyrrho] to adopt a most noble philosophy.” Diogenes is hardly a perfect doxographer, but his *Lives* overall remains a reasonably reliable source, especially if we recall that he had access to numerous texts which are no longer extant. It might also be noted that Pyrrho remained in India with Alexander, mainly in Bactria and Gandhāra, for perhaps a year, if not longer, enjoying sustained contact with indigenous wise men, such as Kalanos, and others (Halkias, 2014, pp. 65–115; 2015, pp. 163–186).

There is no particular reason to doubt this strong claim, but, since it stands alone in the literature, Western classicists and other scholars have been left free to downplay if not ignore it. They have sought, not unreasonably, to find the antecedents of Pyrrho’s thinking in his immediate Greek background, especially in his connection with the Democritean, Megarian, and Cyrenaic traditions. Pyrrho’s mentor, after all, as Diogenes also tells us, was Anaxarchus, a Democritean philosopher, while Megarian philosophers were known to be active in Pyrrho’s hometown, Elis.

A reviewer of my earlier work on this subject, Kristian Urstad, writes that

Kuzminski attributes Pyrrho’s embrace of the phenomenal world—this notion of living in the involuntary world of appearances, free to experience their natural flow, using them as guides to action—to Indian or Buddhist influences; but [...] it seems to me that there was some precedent for this sort of view native to his own philosophical climate. (Urstad, 2010, p. 65)

Urstad invokes the Cyrenaics, particularly Aristippus, as a plausible source of Pyrrho’s philosophy. The Cyrenaics are said to have made phenomena, including the dynamic of pleasure and pain that our phenomena present, the standard for conduct before the Pyrrhonists, who could have adopted it from them. Urstad puts it this way:

Both Pyrrhonists and Cyrenaics did not distrust, but accepted and embraced, our immediately evident sensations and thoughts. And both took appearances as their criteria for action, reacting spontaneously and appropriately to the stimulus offered by them. (Urstad, 2010, p. 65)

The Cyrenaic and Megarian focus on dialectical argumentation may be noted as another anticipation of Pyrrhonian practice.

The most popular Greek candidate as a precedent for Pyrrho, however, is Democritus. Indeed, the attempt to derive Pyrrhonism from Democritus has been a common theme among Western scholars. Perhaps the most emphatic assertion of Democritean sources for Pyrrhonism comes from Thomas McEvelley. There is a certain irony here, given that McEvelley’s monumental

731-page inquiry, *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (2002)—which exhaustively documents a wealth of interactions and parallels between ancient Greeks and Asians before and after Pyrrho—nonetheless insists that there is no serious link between Pyrrhonism and Buddhist thought: “It is clear, then,” McEvelley writes assertively,

that the essentials of Pyrrhonism were already to be found among the followers of Socrates and Democritus in the late fifth and early fourth centuries B.C., well before Alexander’s visit to India. If Pyrrhon encountered such doctrines in India, they must simply have reminded him of doctrines that had been common in Greece for a hundred and fifty years and which his own teachers had taught him. Thus the dialectical, ethical, psychological, and language-critical levels of Pyrrhonism may be said to have been Greek before Alexander. Still, it is possible that Pyrrhon brought back from India some bits or pieces of thought or formulation which seemed useful in terms of attitudes he himself already held. (McEvelley, 2002, p. 495)

And which doctrines “common in Greece for a hundred and fifty years” before Pyrrho does McEvelley have in mind? Democritus, he tells us,

had taught the nondifference of phenomena and the eudaimonistic approach to philosophy—philosophy as a path to a tranquil attitude beyond the effect of phenomenal change—which Pyrrhon is sometimes regarded as having received from an Indian teacher. (McEvelley, 2002, p. 493)

A more recent expression of this pro-Democritean view of Pyrrho’s inspiration can be found in a joint essay by Monte Ransome Johnson and Brett Shults: “Altogether,” they write, “there is much stronger evidence for an influence of Democritus on Pyrrho than there is for any influence of Buddhists on Pyrrho” (Johnson & Shults, 2018, p. 32).

What is that evidence? It can be found, Johnson and Shults say, in Democritus’s early use of what became the Pyrrhonian mantra of “no more,” in the sense of everything being “no more this than that.” This was, they point out, a principle of Democritean understanding of phenomena, illustrated in his observation (repeated by Pyrrhonists) that honey seems sweet to some and bitter to others, and so on, or what McEvelley calls the nondifference of phenomena. Democritus seems to have anticipated the relativistic scepticism that Pyrrhonists applied to *pragmata*. Furthermore, Democritus uses a number of terms (as McEvelley also points out) such as *euthymia*, *athambia*, and even *ataraxia* (Johnson & Shults, 2018, p. 34)—all more or less indicating some form of tranquillity or freedom from fear, long before the Pyrrhonists (and other Hellenistic schools) took it up.

These are impressive precedents, to be sure. They help to explain why Pyrrho is reported by Diogenes to have admired Democritus more than any

other Greek philosopher. However, these and similar precedents have to be set against the clear repudiation of Democritus by Sextus, who writes:

The philosophy of Democritus is also said to have something in common with Scepticism [Pyrrhonism], since it is thought to make use of the same materials as we do. For from the fact that honey appears sweet to some and bitter to others, they say that Democritus deduces that it is neither sweet nor bitter, and for this reason utters the phrase “No more,” which is Sceptical.

But the Sceptics and Democriteans use the phrase “No more” in different senses. The latter assign it the sense that neither is the case, we the sense that we do not know whether some apparent things is both or neither. [...] But the clearest distinction is made when Democritus says “In verity there are atoms and void.” For by “In verity” he means “In truth”—and I think it is superfluous to remark that he differs from us in saying that atoms and void in truth subsist, even if he does begin from the anomaly in what is apparent. (Sextus Empiricus, 2000, 1.213)

Democritus, in other words, is clearly labelled a dogmatist by Sextus, no doubt reflecting the Pyrrhonian attitude towards him.

In practically the same breath, Sextus goes on to make an equally sharp distinction between the Cyrenaics and the Pyrrhonists:

Some say that the Cyrenaic persuasion is the same as Scepticism [Pyrrhonism], since it too says that we only apprehend feelings. But it differs from Scepticism since it states that the aim is pleasure and a smooth motion of the flesh, while we say that it is tranquillity, which is contrary to the aim they propose—for whether pleasure is present or absent, anyone who affirms that pleasure is the aim submits to troubles [...]. Further, we suspend judgment (as far as the argument goes) about external existing things, while the Cyrenaics assert that they have an inapprehensible nature. (Sextus Empiricus, 2000, 1.215)

Their recognition of the importance of phenomena is vitiated, according to Sextus, by such dogmatic conclusions.

Finally, Democritus’s own words can be cited to disabuse anyone of any confusion between his views and the Pyrrhonian understanding of experience: “There are two sorts of knowledge,” he tells us,

one genuine, one bastard (or “*obscure*”). To the latter belong all the following: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch. The real is separated from this. When the bastard can do no more—neither see more minutely, nor hear, nor smell, nor taste, nor perceive by touch—and a finer investigation is needed, then the genuine comes in as having a tool for distinguishing more finely. (Fragment 11 in Freeman, 1966, p. 93)

No Pyrrhonian would make such a dogmatic distinction.

5.

It would be cavalier, however, to dismiss these important Greek seeds of Pyrrhonism as being of no consequence. Although there is no space here to show in detail how these precedents were integrated into Pyrrhonian thinking, let me offer a preliminary account of how that may have happened. I suggest an alternate reading of Pyrrhonism, one which accepts the atomistic insight of Leucippus and Democritus, but radically transforms it. The Pyrrhonists, as Sextus makes plain, rejected the dogmatic physical atomism of Democritus, in which atoms were believed to be invisible, impenetrable particles moving through the void. They substituted instead, I suggest, a phenomenalist atomism in which atoms are the thoughts and sensations moving through the stream of consciousness, endlessly combining and recombining as *pragmata*. This primacy of *pragmata* is not just to be found in Sextus and later Pyrrhonism, but is also clearly indicated by Pyrrho's immediate disciple, Timon, presumably reflecting Pyrrho himself: "But the apparent is omnipotent wherever it goes" (Diogenes Laertius, 1925, 9.105, p. 517).

Atomism can be illustrated by the model of the alphabet, which was used by Sextus, and which, since it is traceable back to Democritus (Berryman, 2016), was no doubt available to Pyrrho as well. In the alphabet model, individual letters have no meaning in themselves, but only gain meaning when they are combined together into words. Insofar as phenomena are similarly recognized as elements, they too are observed to have no meaning in themselves, but only gaining meaning when combined with other phenomena to make *pragmata*. Like the letters of the alphabet, our phenomenal elements do not normally appear in isolation, but rather in combination. A phenomenal element is like a pixel on a computer screen; it lights up, as it were, only in relation to other pixels. If we try to disassociate a phenomenal element from any other phenomenal element, it disappears, becoming imperceptible.

We can nonetheless perceive phenomenal elements, albeit only in combination with other phenomenal elements. We cannot isolate a phenomenal element in itself; we can only approximate it by taking it as it appears in its simplest and most reliable *pragma* (where it remains in conjunction with at least one other element). We can then use that approximation as a placeholder for the element itself. Similarly, any visual mark we make for a letter of the alphabet, or any sound we make for that same letter, is also an approximation, subject to variations of context. There is no pure and absolute written or spoken letter, as is evident from the plethora of fonts from which we draw to

indicate any individual visible letter, as well as from the plethora of sounds from which we similarly draw to indicate any individual audible letter.

No other Greek school advanced a phenomenalist atomism; this, I suggest, is what distinguishes Pyrrhonism from its predecessors (and contemporaries). The Democriteans were atomists without being phenomenologists, and the Cyrenaics were phenomenologists without being atomists. All the other Greek schools remained bound by an implicit—if not explicit—dogmatic metaphysics which distinguished between appearances (thoughts and sensations) and the imagined realities which were presumed to inform those appearances, whether or not they could be observed. The Pyrrhonists stood this dogmatic metaphysics on its head, taking appearances as inescapable facts while suspending judgement on any possible reality underlying those appearances.

This, I suggest, is the insight that Pyrrho could have found in his sustained encounters with the gymnosophists in India. It is perhaps a distinguishing feature of some Indian schools (including Buddhists) to begin with the flow of experience in consciousness as opposed to another starting point, such as the motion of objects in space. No contemporary Greek school took the flow of experience as a point of departure. It would have been natural for the young Pyrrho to have translated this approach, if he encountered it among the gymnosophists, into the atomistic thinking that he likely brought with him to India. And among the gymnosophists, only Buddhists could have presented him with a non-dogmatic phenomenism that was congenial to atomism. It was the Buddhists who most likely could have presented him with an opportunity to recast dependent origination into atomistic terms: hence what I have called the Greek reinvention of Buddhism. Pyrrho's atomism, like the Buddha's, is phenomenalist, not dogmatic. The elements of the Pyrrhonian–Buddhist phenomenalist atomism are the immediate thoughts and sensations we directly experience, and it is the combination of these thoughts and sensations which produce the *pragmata*, or facts, of our experience.

A reviewer of my earlier work, M. Jason Reddoch, captures the point I have been trying to make, both then and now: “The key issue,” he writes, “is that Pyrrhonism differs from the traditional perspective of Western philosophy in that it does not assume that the physical world requires *some intellectual organizing power* in order to explain it” (Reddoch, 2010, p. 425; my emphasis). Pyrrho found this insight, I suggest, not among Democriteans or Cyrenaics or anywhere else in Greece, but among the gymnosophists in India. Moreover, he would not have found it in most of the philosophical

schools of India either, which were almost all variously dogmatic. The one place where he could have found it, where the idea of an “intellectual organizing power” to explain the world is clearly absent, is in the Buddhist principle of dependent origination. This is distinguished from all other understandings of experience by its explicit denial of any claim of understanding the phenomena of experience except in their own terms, as being dependently (not independently) arisen.

6.

The whole point of dependent origination is the recognition that the phenomenal elements of our experience are *not* to be explained by reference to entities or forces existing separately and independently of those elements. The word for these elements, or phenomenal atoms, in Buddhism is *dharmas*: a notoriously elusive term. The commentaries on the Pāli Canon, we are told on good authority, “ascribe at least ten different contextual meanings to the word [*dharma*] as it occurs in the Canon” (Bodhi, 2005, p. 54). Normative Buddhism exemplifies this uncertainty with its well-known lists of 75 *dharmas* developed by the Sarvāstivādins and 82 *dharmas* developed by the Theravāda, among others (Ronkin, 2018). These *dharmas* are variously understood as contributing to, diminishing, or overcoming the *saṃsāric* process generated out of their mutual dependency. What normative Buddhism seems to have done to come up with scores of *dharmas* is to consider sensations and thoughts in a number of different relations or roles with one another (whether they are inflows or outflows, internal or external, past, present, or future, etc.). Most of the 75 (or 82, etc.) *dharmas* are elements of thought, not sensation. However, in all these variations, *dharmas* always remain the immediate objects of perception present to consciousness, either sensations or thoughts.⁶

Theodore Stcherbatsky’s Buddhist scholarship is a century old, but his summary account of Buddhist *dharmas* as phenomenalistic elements is worth recalling:

The elements of existence [in Buddhism] are momentary appearances, momentary flashings into the phenomenal world out of an unknown source. Just as they are disconnected, so to say, in breadth, not being linked together by

⁶ For a recent review of early Buddhist uses of the term *dharma*, see Gethin (2004, pp. 513–542).

any pervading substance, just so they are disconnected in depth or in duration since they last only one single moment (*kṣana*). They disappear as soon as they appear, in order to be followed the next moment by another momentary existence. Thus a moment becomes a synonym of an element (*dharmā*), two moments are two different elements. An element becomes something like a point in time-space. [...] The idea that two moments make two different elements remains. Consequently, the elements do not change, but disappear, the world becomes a cinema. Disappearance is the very essence of existence; what does not disappear does not exist. A cause for the Buddhist was not a real cause but a preceding moment, which likewise arose out of nothing in order to disappear into nothing. (Stcherbatsky, 1923/2001, pp. 37–38)

Stcherbatsky argued for the significance of *dharma*s in early Buddhism as qualities—as sensations and thoughts—more vigorously than most later scholars. It is these *dharma*s, he insisted, these qualities without substances, that constitute the uninterpreted and involuntary flow of experience. Rupert Gethin offers support for Stcherbatsky’s approach when he concludes that

dhammas [*dharma*s] are the basic qualities, both mental and physical, that in some sense constitute experience or reality in its entirety. What I think is undeniable is that, whether or not one accepts this as something the Buddha himself taught, this sense and basic understanding of *dhamma* is firmly established and imbedded in the Nikāyas. Indeed I think it is not unreasonable to suggest that it is the prevalent usage of the word *dhamma* in the Nikāyas. (Gethin, 2004, p. 521)

Another recent Buddhist scholar, Robin Brons, in a lucid comparison of Madhyamaka and Pyrrhonism, nicely delineates the role of elementary *dharma*s (appearances) in the parallelism he draws between the Buddhist conventional and ultimate truth and the Pyrrhonian distinction between what is evident and what is not. Brons notes that

according to Madhyamaka, the ultimate truth (what is found by rigorous investigation) is *śūnyatā*. Nothing can withstand such analysis, and thus there are no ultimate truths. Inherent existence (*svabhāva*) and how things are by nature simply cannot be found. Mādhyamikas do, however, assent to the conventional truth, which parallels Sextus’ notion of appearances: “[the conventional truth] corresponds to appearances, so it must not be analysed” [...]. Hence Sextus’ involuntary assent to the appearances can be seen as assent to the conventional, and assent to the non-evident can be seen as assent to the ultimate. Since no ultimately true things are to be found, the latter assent is misguided. It is a fundamental error to take the conventional truth to be inherently existent. (Brons, 2018, pp. 334–335)⁷

⁷ For a less conclusive comparison of Madhyamaka and Pyrrhonism, see Garfield (1990, pp. 285–307) and Dreyfus and Garfield (2011, pp. 115–130).

The Buddhist classifications of various groups of *dharmas*—including the *skandhas* and others—can be understood, following Brons, to correspond to various instances of what the Pyrrhonians called *pragmata*, or facts. Just as the elementary *dharmic* qualities inform the broader *dharmas* and the karmic flow itself, so do appearances—our involuntary, immediate sensations and thoughts—inform the facts of human experience.

The recognition that Democritean atomism could be shorn of its dogmatism and repurposed to accommodate Buddhist phenomenalism was, I suggest, Pyrrho's defining achievement. In his day, the detailed superstructure later established in the Pāli Canon, the Abhidharma, and other Buddhist commentaries was almost certainly not as fully articulated as it later became. In those early circumstances, it may have been less important which classifications of *dharmas*, or *pragmata*, were the most correct, or the most helpful. What may have mattered more was the basic insight of the richness and complexity of the flow of *all* phenomena—however variously displayed as *skandhas/pragmata*—understood as the product of their mutual dependence and as constituting the actual nature of our experience. The appearing and disappearing world of phenomenal atomism is the world of things evident; the absence which seems to accompany all phenomena is perhaps where consciousness is hidden, in that which is stubbornly non-evident.

Early Buddhism, as perhaps reflected in Pyrrhonism, may have been a simpler, more direct, more accessible practice of liberation from beliefs than later Buddhism. The beliefs and attachments that both Buddhists and Pyrrhonists exhort us to suspend, we might note, include not only the desires we can recognize as problematic, but also those widely acclaimed as virtuous. A life of pleasure, greed, or narcissism is something we can understand as harmful and self-defeating, but marriage, patriotism, and justice are perhaps not so easily dismissed, though they are equally dogmatic beliefs.

It might be noted as well that the *ataraxia* the Pyrrhonists discovered through their phenomenalistic atomism (revealed by the suspension of judgement) is arguably very different from what other Greek philosophers meant by their use of *ataraxia* and related terms such as *euthymia* and *athambia*. Pyrrho is never described as cheerful, like Democritus, nor as a laughing philosopher, like Anaxarchus, nor as a man focused on pleasure and pain, like Epicurus—from which contrast Epicurus claimed to derive his own version of *ataraxia*. Our impression of Pyrrho is rather that of a serene, remarkably self-contained man, indifferent to pleasure and pain, not a figure out to

lead people or make a name for himself as most of the others were. The Buddha's initial impulse after enlightenment was a similar sense of reticence. His first notion was not to teach his insight, and Pyrrho, perhaps out of the same impulse, was content to live quietly in a repose and tranquillity born out of a steady concentration on *pragmata* and to let others make of his example what they would.

7.

Having come full circle, let me close by suggesting some parallels between the features of Pyrrhonism that I have just outlined and some common features of Buddhism, using Pyrrhonism as a lens to focus the vague cloud of early Buddhism. Putting aside the later differences among Buddhist schools, it turns out that some of the more common features of Buddhism as we know it—what Beckwith calls “normative” Buddhism (Beckwith, 2015, p. 8 *et passim*)—can be expressed in Pyrrhonian language. These features are encapsulated in a series of general Buddhist terms, such as dependent origination, attachment, eternalism and annihilationism, the Middle Path, and so on. There is no space in this short exposition to explore the nuances of Buddhist terminology. I will rely instead on the approximate popular understandings that they currently enjoy.

I suggest a series of parallels. First: Pyrrhonian talk about mutually defining, fluctuating evident and non-evident appearances is matched by Buddhist talk about the dependent origination of our impermanent phenomenal states. Second, the Pyrrhonian rejection of dogmatic beliefs—beliefs about things inherently non-evident—is matched by the Buddhist rejection of clinging, or attachment to such things. Third, the Pyrrhonist rejection of positive and negative dogmatisms is matched by the Buddhist rejection of eternalism and annihilationism. Fourth, the open, evidence-based inquiry advanced by the Pyrrhonists is matched by the Buddhist Middle Path; both share a practical, phenomena-based empiricism. Fifth, the Pyrrhonian suspension of judgement regarding dogmatic belief is matched by the “unanswered questions” of the Buddhists. Sixth, the Pyrrhonian rejection of the interpretation of facts is matched by the Buddhist assertion of the “emptiness” of experience. And seventh, the imperturbability, or *ataraxia*, of the Pyrrhonists is matched by the Buddhist enlightenment or liberation.

Let me take these parallels in order. First, consider appearances, both present and absent. Pyrrhonian appearances are entirely conditioned by one another, and not, as far as we can tell, by anything outside of them. Thoughts and sensations are variously and continuously being recombined into different sets, facts, or *pragmata*—the ever-changing but recurring and often reliable arrangements of appearances. No appearance in itself is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, and so on; what it turns out to be depends entirely on the context in which it appears.

Dependent origination similarly holds that nothing in our experience is permanent or independently existing. Buddhists speak of appearances somewhat differently from Pyrrhonists, as we have seen, but in both cases, appearances are transient and mutually defining. The Buddhists' fluctuating *skandhas* and the Pyrrhonists' presences and absences of *pragmata* both have an intermediate existence: neither permanent and independent on the one hand, nor illusory and non-existent on the other.

Both Buddhists and Pyrrhonists understand appearances to be the elements or atoms which constitute our experience. Both understand these elements to be wholly dependent on one another and experienced by us as bundles of involuntarily evident thoughts and sensations. Dependent origination is the sum of the experiences we necessarily suffer, according to the Buddhists, and the Pyrrhonists also posit our suffering them. Here, we might keep in mind the root meaning of suffering as involuntary experience, as necessarily enduring something, whether pleasurable or painful, as being tied to it. This is perhaps what the Buddha meant all along by suffering, or *dukkha*.

Second, consider our beliefs. The essence of dogmatism, according to the Pyrrhonists, is belief, and beliefs are claims about what is (or seems to be) inherently non-evident (and so empirically unverifiable). We do not have to believe anything about our appearances. However, we cannot help but know them, and we can only affirm what we do not know by believing in it.

Our most important beliefs are not claims about what is temporarily or practically non-evident; in those cases, as we have seen, what counts to resolve such claims must be evident, whether practically possible or not. Our most important beliefs, by contrast, are about things inherently non-evident, which, it seems, cannot be resolved.

The Buddhist equivalent of belief is attachment, or clinging, which, I suggest, is indistinguishable from belief. To believe something is to be attached to it. In both traditions, the linguistic mechanism of attachment is a sign of some kind, such as a name—or what the Buddhists call *nāma-rūpa*, or name-

and-form. It might also be a performative act—such as a wedding vow, or a declaration of war—a sign which is believed to create an intangible reality with tangible consequences. There are many forms of attachment, but they all seem to presuppose a language of belief in the existence of things inherently non-evident. Beliefs, or attachments, for Pyrrhonists and Buddhists alike, are intentional human activities; they are the conscious creation of fictional entities deemed to be permanent.

Third, consider the Pyrrhonist rejection of positive and negative dogmatisms compared with the Buddhist rejection of eternalism on the one hand and annihilationism on the other. Eternalists, for Buddhists, correspond to the Pyrrhonists' positive dogmatists, those who postulate some kind of permanent, independent entity or concept, such as God, the Soul, or Substance, not to mention Race, History, Nature, Gender, or almost anything said to underlie all or part of our experience. Similarly, the Buddhists' annihilationists correspond to the negative dogmatists, total sceptics, or nihilists spurned by the Pyrrhonists. To these ancient annihilationists, we might add today's relativists or deconstructionists, insofar as no interpretation of experience can be any better or worse than any other.

Fourth, the Buddhist "middle path" accepts appearances in their mutual dependency; that is, as neither existing absolutely (as permanent, independent essences) nor failing to exist at all (as pure illusions). Similarly, the Pyrrhonists' acceptance of continued inquiry—necessitated by ever-changing experience—is their version of the middle path between positive and negative dogmatisms, where appearances have an intermediate, contingent, contextual status, existing neither absolutely nor not at all. Both Pyrrhonism and Buddhism, I suggest, make appearances, not concepts or ideas, the criterion of experience. Both of them are compatible with and even promote phenomena-based scientific inquiry.

Fifth, the Pyrrhonists talk of the suspension of judgement: a conclusion they draw from the incompatible interpretations of what is inherently non-evident. This is paralleled by the Buddha's famously "unanswered questions" regarding the nature of the world, the nature of the self, existence after death, and other non-evident things. Both Pyrrhonists and Buddhists find it impossible to arrive at a determination of things inherently non-evident. Like the Pyrrhonists, the Buddha refused to speculate on such matters; he confined himself to what is evident, to appearances on the one hand and their absence on the other. Both Pyrrhonists and Buddhists maintain that interpretations postulate permanent, fictional entities which, if we embrace them, interrupt

and block the natural flow of experience, leaving us trapped, snagged by some form of attachment, or bondage.

Sixth, consider the Pyrrhonists' refusal to interpret appearances. To take appearances at face value is to make them their own criterion. Once we do this, there is nothing apart from appearances by which they can be judged; there is no available essence or form somehow within or behind them by which they can be explained and made permanent. The Buddhists advance a similar view of appearances when they insist that appearances are "empty." The emptiness of our experience, of our phenomenal life, is the absence of any hidden content which can organize and explain our immediate thoughts and sensations. Our direct experience is simply what it is, as it comes and goes. If appearances are their own criterion, if they are dependently originated yet practically reliable, then the fictional entities we can imagine are unnecessary in order to understand those appearances. The fictions are a distraction at best and a virtual prison at worst. Our appearances should rather be left "empty" of interpretation if they are to be appreciated for what they are.

As a seventh and final point of comparison, let me suggest that the Pyrrhonist *ataraxia*, or imperturbability, that follows the suspension of judgment can be understood as the equivalent of the liberation or enlightenment proclaimed to be the result of Buddhist practices. The peace we gain is liberation from the anxiety of belief, from its uncertainty and its vulnerability to endless controversy. Once we deconstruct our beliefs and distinguish interpretations from appearances, we can see the dependent origination of appearances as the involuntary experiences that they are, free of interpretation; we can also see the indeterminate nature of the inherently non-evident, including any self we may have, and the futility of trying to explain (or deny) the unexplainable.

In sum, Pyrrhonists and Buddhists both live "by what is apparent," as Sextus puts it, and "in accordance with everyday observances": what the Buddhists call right conduct and the Pyrrhonists call piety. To do this is to follow evident experience without belief or interpretation, to accept what that experience (or its absence) offers without qualification, and to act accordingly.

Right conduct, or piety, includes the recognition and respect—call it compassion—due to all these real-life experiences and practices, even those of believers. According to both Pyrrhonists and Buddhists, it is only by ultimately trusting what is evident and cannot be evaded that the errors of belief can be recognized, and thereby avoided, and peace of mind be made possible.

References

Primary Sources

- Empiricus, Sextus (1935). *Against the Logicians*, translated by R. G. Bury. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library 291).
- Empiricus, Sextus (2000). *Outlines of Scepticism*, edited by Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy).
- Freeman, Kathleen (trans. 1966). *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Complete Translation of the Fragments in Diels*, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. Second edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hume, David (1993). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: With Hume's Abstract of A Treatise of Human Nature and A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh*, edited by Eric Steinburg. Second edition. Indianapolis: Hackett. (Original work published 1748.)
- Laertius, Diogenes (1925). *Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Volume II: Books 6–10*, translated by R. D. Hicks. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Loeb Classical Library 185).
- Laertius, Diogenes (2018). *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, edited by James Miller, translated by Pamela Mensch. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (2009–). NF-1888, 14[100]. *Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe Werke und Briefe (eKGWB)*, edited by Paolo D'Iorio. Retrieved from [www.nietzschesource.org/eKGWB/index#eKGWB/NF-1888,14\[99\]](http://www.nietzschesource.org/eKGWB/index#eKGWB/NF-1888,14[99]). (Based on Nietzsche, Friedrich [1967–]. *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, edited by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. Berlin: De Gruyter. Original work written 1888.)

Secondary Literature

- Berryman, Sylvia (2016). "Democritus." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/democritus>.
- Bett, Richard (2000). *Pyrrho, His Antecedents, and His Legacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Bodhi, Bhikkhu (2005). "Introduction." *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*, translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi. Fourth edition. Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 19–60.
- Brons, Robin (2018). "Life Without Belief: A Madhyamaka Defense of the Livability of Pyrrhonism." *Philosophy East and West* 68/2, 329–351.
- Dreyfus, Georges, and Jay L. Garfield (2011). "Madhyamaka and Classical Greek Skepticism." *Moonshadows: Conventional Truth in Buddhist Philosophy*, edited by The Cowherds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 115–130.
- Garfield, Jay L. (1990). "Epoche and Śūnyatā: Skepticism East and West." *Philosophy East and West* 40/3, 285–307.
- Gethin, Rupert (2004). "He Who Sees Dhamma Sees Dhammas: Dhamma in Early Buddhism." *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32/5–6, 513–542.
- Halkias, Georgios T. (2014). "When the Greeks Converted the Buddha: Asymmetrical Transfers of Knowledge in Indo-Greek Cultures." *Religions and Trade: Religious Formation, Transformation and Cross-Cultural Exchange between East and West*, edited by Peter Wick and Volker Rabens. Leiden: Brill, 65–115 (Dynamics in the History of Religions 5).
- Halkias, Georgios T. (2015). "The Self-Immolation of Kalanos and Other Luminous Encounters Among Greeks and Indian Buddhists in the Hellenistic World." *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 8, 163–186.
- Johnson, Monte Ransome, and Brett Shults (2018). "Early Pyrrhonism as a Sect of Buddhism? A Case Study in the Methodology of Comparative Philosophy." *Comparative Philosophy* 9/2, 1–40.
- Kuzminski, Adrian (2008). *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books (Studies in Comparative Philosophy and Religion).
- McEvelley, Thomas (2002). *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies*. New York: Allworth Press.
- Reddoch, M. Jason (2010). "Review of *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism*." *Philosophy East and West* 60/3, 424–427.
- Ronkin, Noa (2018). "Abhidharma." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/abhidharma>.
- Stcherbatsky, Theodore (2001). *The Central Conception of Buddhism and the Meaning of the Word "Dharma"*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass. (Original work published 1923.)
- Urstad, Kristian (2010). "Review of *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism*." *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 17, 56–65.