

## PYRRHO'S PATH AND THE EQUANIMOUS LIFE

### O TRAJETO DE PIRRO E A VIDA EQUÂNIME

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#### Abstract

The shadowy figure of Pyrrho has been intriguing modern scholars ever since the outlines of his thought were rediscovered in the sixteenth century, most notably by Michel de Montaigne. The academic approach to the Pyrrhonian legacy has been complicated, however, not only by the difficulties of reconstructing Pyrrho's philosophy from particularly fragmentary evidence, but also by the fact that it was not conceived as an academic exercise, but rather as a practical guide to life—or as a Taoist or Buddhist might put it, a Way or Path. The analogies with Eastern teachings should not be taken too far, of course, as if Pyrrho had been literally a Buddhist, let alone a practitioner of Zen; but the parallels are still helpful for “untangling the tangle” and making more vivid and credible a philosophical way of life that was by no means dull and disengaged, as has sometimes been alleged, but on the contrary, loving and joyfully equanimous.

**Keywords:** Pyrrho, Skepticism, Buddhism, Zen, Way of Life.

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## Resumo

A misteriosa figura de Pirro tem intrigado a crítica moderna desde que o seu pensamento foi redescoberto no século XVI, especialmente por Michel de Montaigne. A abordagem académica do seu legado oferece, no entanto, dificuldades, por duas ordens de razões. Por um lado, é difícil reconstituir a filosofia pirroniana, em virtude do seu caráter fragmentário; por outro, ela foi concebida como guia prático de vida (ou segundo o Taoísmo ou o Budismo como caminho ou trajeto) e não propriamente como um exercício escolar. Parece insensato estabelecer analogias abusivas com os ensinamentos orientais, como se Pirro tivesse sido realmente budista, muito menos como se fosse um praticante do Zen. Contudo, o paralelismo será útil para deslindar o mistério e tornar mais vívido e credível um modo de vida filosófico que, longe de ser irrelevante e descomprometido, como, por vezes, foi entendido, é afetiva e alegremente equânime.

**Palavras-chave:** Pirro, Ceticismo, Budismo, Zen, Modo de vida.

“The Emperor Wu of Liang described all that he had done to promote the practice of Buddhism, and asked Bodhidharma what merit he had gained thereby. Bodhidharma replied, ‘No merit whatever!’ This so undermined the Emperor’s idea of Buddhism that he asked, ‘What, then, is the sacred doctrine’s first principle?’ Bodhidharma replied, ‘It’s just empty; there’s nothing sacred.’ ‘Who, then, are you,’ said the Emperor, ‘to stand before us?’ ‘I don’t know,’ said Bodhidharma.”<sup>2</sup>

The connection between Pyrrho and Buddhism is nothing very new. Nietzsche honored it with a sneer,<sup>3</sup> and it has been explored, over the past half-century, in a number of expert treatments whose sophisticated terms of engagement this article cannot hope to rival.<sup>4</sup> What these accounts have not always done quite so well, however, is to bring out in vivid colors the *way of life* that Pyrrho represented—with a direct liveliness such as has been commonly considered the very hallmark of Zen, especially. For as

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<sup>2</sup> Watts 2019: 86. One need not consider Alan Watts’s oeuvre the last word on Zen, or on anything else, to think that he captured some of the fundamentals of the tradition rather well. This article has its reasons, moreover, for keeping the characterizations of Zen basic, even rudimentary, as the emphasis is on better understanding Pyrrho, not on the comparisons per se.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, sec. 437 (1968: 241): “Sagacious weariness: Pyrrho. To live a lowly life among the lowly... A Buddhist for Greece.”

<sup>4</sup> See in particular Flintoff’s seminal essay in *Phronesis* (1980), McEvilley 1982, Kuzminski 2010, and Beckwith 2015.

some Western philosophers too, most notably Pierre Hadot, have urged, the ancient thinkers, Pyrrho included, were no mere setters and solvers of intellectual puzzles, but philosopher-therapists who advocated outlooks and methods that they had themselves experienced as *liberating*.<sup>5</sup>

If a corresponding note of urgency creeps, here and there, into the effort to make sense of the Pyrrhonian philosophy, the exercise may sit somewhat uncomfortably beside the academic conventions of our day; but surely it cannot just be dismissed as inappropriate when Pyrrho would recognize it very well, possibly better than most of what we practice under the name of philosophy today. Should not a bit of room be left for bringing a thinker's own ideas to bear on our reflections about him—thus allowing for Pyrrho to be approached in his own skeptical spirit, acknowledging from the outset what a shadowy figure he must remain to us,<sup>6</sup> and that any account given of his life and its meaning will be as much a reflection of the interpreter's habits and experiences as of the elusive truth? To rule out the broad brush as too fanciful in such an intellectual sketch would be like dismissing a Zen painter for the undue freedom of his strokes.

The spirit of Zen will be invoked here in a loose sense only, not with any expectation of establishing exact coordinates, but as a kind of compass, or the needle thereon—a finger pointing at the moon, as it is said. There can be no question of making of Pyrrho a Buddhist in any strict sense, let

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<sup>5</sup> Thus Hadot 1995: 265, "During this period, philosophy was a *way of life*, ... a mode of existing-in-the-world that had to be practiced at each instant, and the goal of which was to transform the whole of the individual's life." Likewise, Spinelli 2014: 653, "The distinctive feature of ancient thought was ... deep and never-ending work on the self, that is, an all-inclusive *art of living*," and Watts 2019: x, xii, "To know what Zen is, and especially what it is not, there is no alternative but... to be sympathetic and to experiment personally with a way of life." As Hadot (1995: 265–66) makes clear, the skeptics need to be included among the ancient therapeutic schools, and the gap with rival Greek traditions is not in fact as wide as it may appear at first glance: "Both the grandeur and the paradox of ancient philosophy is that it was, at one and the same time, conscious of the fact that wisdom is inaccessible, and convinced of the necessity of pursuing spiritual progress." Compare also Cooper 2012: 277, 281, 299.

<sup>6</sup> For the shadow image in other commentaries, see Kuzminski 2010: 117 and Barnes 1990: 2615. Cooper too uses it in the context of suggesting that Pyrrho may be best understood as a retroactive sponsor or "honorary figurehead" for a later school of thought, in line with the ancient habit of establishing intellectual pedigrees in hopes of thereby getting closer to the original truth of things (Cooper 2012: 279–80). The argument here is more sanguine about the possibility of using Pyrrho's shadow, together with some side-glances in an Eastward direction, to make plausible conjectures about what he who cast it might have been like.

alone a devotee of Zen, a thousand years before its time. The point, then, will not be to lay claim to the elusive analytical rigor that would be needed to paint a complete picture of Pyrrho in relation to the ways of the East such as might satisfy specialists on either side, but only to use the basics of Zen, and of Buddhism in general, to construct a frame around a sketch of Pyrrho that brings out some vital shades—nuances in its distinctive “flavor” as Watts might put it.<sup>7</sup>

If such an attempt be found to have much, perhaps too much, in common with a Montaignian “essay” rather than a scholarly article in the more familiar sense, it might be remembered how much Montaigne’s reflections owed to a *Pyrrhonian* inspiration.<sup>8</sup> The inadequacy of one’s labors as an author would, moreover, need to be connected, via the First Noble Truth, to the Buddhist insistence on the unsatisfactory element in all things, and to the Zen tenet that the dualistic categories we must apply in all deliberate thinking will invariably get reflected back to us as in a mirror whose images we mistake for the reality of things, when in fact the frame is the more solid part, and the mirror itself, quite empty.

## I Mindfulness

That Pyrrho should have practiced mindfulness in a sense that students of Buddhism might still recognize today may seem scarcely credible on the face of it, and not much more plausible upon review of the scant evidence that has come down to us about his life. Nonetheless, scattered among the fragments, there are some suggestive hints.

Most explicitly, we are told that Pyrrho would periodically “withdraw from the world and live in solitude,” and that this was a habit he acquired on account of a reproach he had once heard during his Indian sojourns in the train of Alexander.<sup>9</sup> Surely it requires no great leap of faith to think that what looked so eccentric to his contemporaries were periods of retreat and meditation, presumably using methods he had brought back from his travels.

The strange vignette in Diogenes Laertius wherein Pyrrho, found mumbling to himself, explains to someone that he was “training to be

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Watts 2019: 77.

<sup>8</sup> Compare especially Montaigne, *Essays* I.xiv and II.xii (2003: 43, 451–55, 477).

<sup>9</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.63.

good,”<sup>10</sup> must have appeared as bizarre in his day as it initially looks in ours, until one realizes that Pyrrho may have been speaking in a foreign tongue,<sup>11</sup> likely reciting prayers or mantras that he had picked up from his friendly interactions “with the Indian gymnosophists and with the magi.”<sup>12</sup> Pyrrho's disciples, some of whom seem to have followed him in adopting the habit of “talking to themselves,”<sup>13</sup> may have been copying a mere personal idiosyncrasy, as enthusiastic students are sometimes wont to; but it is much more likely that what they were doing was to take up a serious practice in which he was instructing them. Training oneself to be good is no trifle.

Even more intriguing is the possibility, also suggested by a passage in Diogenes, that Pyrrho made a practice of continually contemplating the impermanence of all things<sup>14</sup>—*anicca*, in the language of the Pali canon, the first of the three marks of existence, often described as the “gateway to deliverance” if it is made the object of sustained observation. Thus the conclusion of one the most memorable Suttas in the *Anguttara Nikaya*: “More fruitful than the greatest alms-offering, than feeding a hundred *arahants* or a Buddha, than going for refuge or taking the five precepts, even than developing a mind of loving-kindness, would it be to develop the perception of impermanence just for the duration of a finger-snap.”<sup>15</sup> The Vipassana or insight meditation tradition makes most of this exhortation, but the Buddha himself is said to have devoted his last words to it,<sup>16</sup> and it is no less recognized in Zen: “That everything changes is the basic truth

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<sup>10</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.64.

<sup>11</sup> Beckwith 2015: 93.

<sup>12</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.61. No very revealing labels, it must be said, for forming conjectures about just what spiritual teachings Pyrrho may have been exposed to during his travels, but indicative enough of his readiness to engage with local tradition in the spirit of a “pilgrimage” (Flintoff 1980: 90). Thus *ibid.* 88: “It is surely the plain meaning that Pyrrho both encountered and associated with ... certain ‘magi’ who might just conceivably be the Iranian priestly Magi, but given the use of the word *magus* at this date and in this particular context, are more probably holy men from India itself, either Hindu, Jain, or even Buddhist, and that as a result of this encounter not merely the life-style but the very thought of Pyrrho was completely transformed.”

<sup>13</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.69.

<sup>14</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.67.

<sup>15</sup> Thus, in the Pali Canon, *Anguttara Nikaya* 9.20 (2012: 1276–77).

<sup>16</sup> In contemporary terms, “All things are impermanent—keep up your practice diligently!” Or more literally, *Digha Nikaya* 16.6.7 (1995: 270): “All conditioned things are of a nature to decay—strive on untiringly!”

of existence. No one can deny this truth and *all the teaching of Buddhism is condensed within it.*"<sup>17</sup>

Less evident, though no less instructive upon reflection, is the meaning of a curious anecdote about Pyrrho refusing to give a hand when his companion Anaxarchus had fallen into a ditch, and then not being blamed but praised by him for his *sang-froid*!<sup>18</sup> Commonly adduced to show "how strange a character the skeptic is,"<sup>19</sup> the implications of the story, properly considered, point just the other way. As this essay will try to show throughout, nothing could be further from the truth than the image of Pyrrho as a "model of eccentricity" (Thorsrud).<sup>20</sup> Far from being unusually radical characters, Pyrrho and his followers appear to have been, on the contrary, eminently practical and sensible human beings animated by the same keen appreciation for the ordinary and the everyday<sup>21</sup> that is also such a distinguishing feature of Zen. Thus Lin-chi Lu's classic summary of the spirit of the Teaching: "Just be ordinary and nothing special. Relieve your bowels, pass water, put on your clothes, and eat your food. When you are tired, go and lie down."<sup>22</sup>

The story Anaxarchus's mishap is a classic example of how skeptics have often been made to look ridiculous; yet all it takes is a small change of angle and the scene appears in a completely different light. Falling into ditches is usually more unpleasant and embarrassing than injurious, and if Anaxarchus had needed rescuing, it does not seem likely that he would have found much to commend in his friend's callousness. Nobody in his right mind would have considered Pyrrho's walking off admirable, least of all the sufferer, if it had been a case of refusing to help where help was truly

<sup>17</sup> Suzuki 1995: 102, italics added.

<sup>18</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyrr.* ix.63.

<sup>19</sup> Thorsrud 2009: 179.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Compare Sextus's notion of "the basic grasp common to all men," including philosophers in their everyday lives, and the natural actions that follow from it (Sext. *Emp. Pyrr.* I.xxix.211, I.xxxiv.238, III.xxv.249; *Math.* xi.166). Compare Barnes's account of the Pyrrhonians as champions of *bios*—ordinary life, common sense, or even "garden beliefs" (Barnes 1990: 2617–18, 2622, 2629, 2639, 2641–43) and the connection McEvelly (1982: 33) makes to "Zen texts with their emphasis on 'ordinary everyday mind.'"

<sup>22</sup> Watts 2019: 101. Or more tersely, in the famous definition of Zen attributed to To Po-chang (ibid. 99), "When hungry, eat; when tired, sleep." It should go without saying that the implication is by no means waywardness or mental dullness (ibid. 21): "The idea is not to reduce the mind to a moronic vacuity, but to bring into play its innate and spontaneous intelligence by using it without forcing it."

called for. But what Pyrrho likely meant to demonstrate by example, if the incident ever happened at all, was something else altogether: namely, first, the need to rise above the dread of mere unpleasantness and embarrassment by harmless things (as exemplified by his own readiness to do things that other men around him would have found distasteful, such as cleaning the house or washing the pigs);<sup>23</sup> and second, how a serious skeptical practitioner was precisely *not* meant to stumble blindly into every pit and puddle on his way as if he were no more mindful than a small child, but to pay attention to his surroundings in the manner expected of adults. Mindfulness in the moment, in other words.

If we remained content, instead, with taking the ancient caricatures at face-level, falling into the usual trap of laughing at their seeming silliness, we would not only be forced to ignore altogether the skeptics' own persistent stress on the distinction between the realms of the evident and the non-evident, we would also face some serious difficulties in explaining how it was possible for Pyrrho to have been regarded by his neighbors and contemporaries with such favor, even reverence, if he had indeed been a teacher of irresponsibility and recklessness—attributes that do not usually commend themselves to the admiration of ordinary folk. For not only was Pyrrho widely credited in ancient times with living by a particularly *noble* philosophy;<sup>24</sup> and not only did he attract countless followers who sought to emulate his example, while philosophers of contrary persuasions, like Nausiphanes and Epicurus, expressed their great admiration for his disposition, despite all differences of outlook; but he was also made high priest at Elis and all philosophers were exempted from taxation there on his account.<sup>25</sup> What is more, he and several of his followers are also reported to have reached Methuselean ages, which strains credulity if they really made a habit of demonstrating the robustness of their doubting natures by taking pointless, foolhardy risks at every turn, wandering casually into

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<sup>23</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.66. Beckwith (2015: 51) makes an interesting connection with the Taoist master Lichtzu (in *Chuangtzu* 7.5), who was portrayed in very similar terms: "He did the cooking for his wife; he fed the pigs as if he were feeding people."

<sup>24</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.61.

<sup>25</sup> Burnet (1908: 228) reckoned that his contemporaries considered Pyrrho nothing short of a fully liberated being, an *arahant*. Even if that may be taking things a little too far, their reverential attitude suggests that ordinary human beings found his example quite attractive (as against Bett 2009: 147) and that the scathing rejections came, then as now, mostly from philosophical rivals.

harm's way and having to be pulled back from deadly precipices by their more sensible and less consistent friends.<sup>26</sup>

The persistent myth that the skeptical outlook leaves no room for preferences whatever<sup>27</sup>—as if the good things in life were, by its lights, not to be pursued in any manner, nor the familiar banes avoided,<sup>28</sup> and food or famine, health or disease, life or its destruction all placed on the same dead level—is just tendentious nonsense, emphatically contradicted, from the first, by more reasonable reports that attested, on the contrary, to the Pyrrhonians' particular prudence and thoughtfulness in the conduct of everyday life.<sup>29</sup> Something in the skeptical position provokes such objections, it seems; but that something has less to do with Pyrrho and his actual followers than with the fantasies of those who cannot imagine what a life without beliefs would look like, and who often have little inclination to make the effort because they are so invested in theirs.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.61–64, 70; on the longevity specifically, see ix.62. Compare Ribeiro 2002: 322, “If Pyrrho travelled to India with Alexander and lived to be nearly ninety years old, such stories seem far-fetched indeed—to have friends such as Pyrrho would have needed to stay alive would be a wonder indeed!”

<sup>27</sup> Try to put yourself in a position where you can literally see nothing to choose between two options, suggests Burnyeat (1980: 40–41): “Make yourself vividly aware of your helpless inability to mind either way. *That* is how the skeptic wants you to feel about everything. That is *ataraxia*.”

<sup>28</sup> The misunderstanding feeds on the key difference, often overlooked, between the enjoyment of blessings that come within our reach and the insatiable craving and straining for more—the desperate clinging and clutching that is the doleful twin of the aversion and resentment that rage within us whenever we fail to get, or to keep, what we want. Plínio Smith's “*obsessive way*” (2022: 348) of pursuing or avoiding what we take to be good or bad captures well, I think, what the Pyrrhonists and other practitioners of equanimity are trying to get at (see my fuller discussion in section III).

<sup>29</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.62. The suspicion that the Pyrrhonians' skepticism “denies life” and that their suspension of judgment, fully applied, would reduce them to a “vegetable” existence, is as old as the tradition itself (Sext. Emp. *Math.* xi.163; compare Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.104). But so is the rejoinder: “They answer that *they can live very well* without disquieting themselves about the speculations of the dogmatic philosophers, and that they suspend judgment *only in matters that do not refer to living and the taking of everyday precautions*” (Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.108, italics added for emphasis).

<sup>30</sup> Compare Frede 1987: 180–81, Burnyeat 1980: 30, 36.



## II Pyrrhonian *Sartori*

To speak of a Pyrrhonian's "*sartori*" may sound far-fetched and it is not meant to be insisted upon too strenuously. A loose comparison nonetheless suggests itself when one considers that in koan practice too, the liberating breakthrough is provoked by continually turning up the intellectual heat, boiling the mind in a fierce stew of paradoxes that it cannot resolve or escape by means of discursive reasoning. Thus the method has been described, in a most Pyrrhonian manner, as "cultivating the state of 'great doubt'".<sup>31</sup>

The questions raised by the notion of *striving* for the Pyrrhonists' *ataraxia* are not unlike those often encountered in the context of Buddhist practices, including but not limited to Zen meditation, where it is likewise said that mental breakthroughs cannot be attained by struggling and straining, but that they are nonetheless the matured fruits of a diligent earlier cultivation.<sup>32</sup>

At the outset of the Pyrrhonist path, we find not a hypothesis or argument to be put to others, but a personal confrontation, intense and fundamental, with the limitations of discursive thought.<sup>33</sup> The breakthrough that is said to have ensued for the pioneers of the technique is not a position that they successfully reasoned themselves into (and of which they might therefore wish to convince others), but the fruit of *failure*, an admission of intellectual *defeat*, a lasting testament to their *lived inability* to answer and resolve their questions by thinking them through. Thus confronted with the full measure of their own *incapacity*,<sup>34</sup> they threw in the towel—much like the painter Apelles, as Sextus tells it, who did not succeed in depicting something until he angrily flung a paint-sponge at his painting and thereby

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<sup>31</sup> Watts 2019: 111. To put it more bluntly, koan practice places a student in the "horrendous training situation" of having to solve an unsolvable riddle with nowhere to go but the pure experience of the moment (Gunaratana 2011: 24). Compare also Cooper 2012: 287 on the distresses of the Pyrrhonian skeptics before their breakthrough: "[Finding] themselves frustrated at every turn ... they reached a point of near-despair."

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Olfert 2015: 157, 162. Hence also Thorsrud 2009: 187, "Success only comes by way of a different sort of effort. Rather than active striving, one must simply allow the desired result occur. This is not a matter of completely giving up, but of putting oneself in the right condition to allow the desired result to occur. And that in turn requires first developing the right sort of dispositions through practice."

<sup>33</sup> Thus Cooper 2012: 288 (*italics added*), "Their *experience* with critical reason itself, when using it on the assumption that it is our authoritative guide to the truth, led the skeptics to suspension."

<sup>34</sup> Compare Frede 1987: 185, 187, 191.

inadvertently produced the desired effect.<sup>35</sup> It is only at his wits' end, when the skeptic *gives up* on his attempts at resolving anything definitely, that he fortuitously stumbles into the peace of mind that he had sought in vain by other means.<sup>36</sup>

In light of this unfolding of events, the claim that *ataraxia* “follows the suspension of judgment like its shadow”<sup>37</sup> can stand only as something a Pyrrhonist might put forward in an unauthoritative way, sharing the fruit of personal experience that may or may not be found helpful by others.<sup>38</sup> The journey completed, its landmarks can be described, by way of a possible road map for others;<sup>39</sup> but the test can only ever be in the walking, which everyone must do for himself.

The skeptical teacher's method cannot, then, be a matter of giving guarantees or saving anyone by proxy, but only of issuing an open invitation to anyone who may wish to “come and see” for himself, again with distinct Buddhist echoes.<sup>40</sup> As a confirmed Pyrrhonist, one would no longer

<sup>35</sup> Sext. Emp. *Pyr.* I.xii.28–29. Compare Sedley 1983: 22, “The skeptic gives up and suspends belief, whereupon it dawns on him that, as luck would have it, he is now free from disquiet.”

<sup>36</sup> Sext. Emp. *Pyr.* I.xii.26, 29. Parallels suggest themselves here to the Buddha, whose breakthrough to enlightenment only occurred after he gave up his austerities and started eating again, which freed him to observe his own experiences with the simple joy he remembered from sitting under a tree and watching his father perform a plowing ceremony when he was a small child (*Majjhima Nikaya* 36.30–32 (2005: 247); compare *ibid.* 12.44–52 (2005: 173–75) and *ibid.* 36.20–30 (2005: 337–340)).

<sup>37</sup> Sext. Emp. *Pyr.* I.xii.29, Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.107.

<sup>38</sup> Sextus's references to the “*expectation* of attaining freedom from disturbance” (*Pyr.* I.vi.12), to the “most definite” goal for which the skeptical practice is undertaken (*Pyr.* I.xii.25), and to the “harvest of the most complete happiness” that supposedly awaits those who subscribe to the skeptical method (*Math.* xi.160) are crude advertisements for the technique on a highly competitive philosophical market and should be discounted accordingly.

<sup>39</sup> Pohlenz (1904: 25) argues that it would not make much sense for a skeptical teacher to seek out students, because to be consistent, he would have to teach doubt in what he was himself saying. Yet, if education is to be more than indoctrination, then what Pohlenz describes should not be considered such an oddity, really, but rather the mark of a good teacher, ever-ready to point out weaknesses in his own positions and to remind students not to take anything on blind faith. As Nietzsche has his Zarathustra say in the very last section of part I (1978: 78), “Verily, I say to you, keep your distance and resist Zarathustra! Perhaps he is cheating you... It would be to pay back your teacher very poorly if you only ever remained his pupils.”

<sup>40</sup> The traditional “Homage to the Dhamma” describes the Buddha's teaching as “visible here and now, timeless, inviting you to *come and see* [*ehipassiko*], leading onwards, to be

be engaged in debates that one must win, or concerned with staking out intellectual ground that must be defended or expanded by convincing others of its merits;<sup>41</sup> the experiential roots of one's *ataraxia*, however unexpected, should now run too deep to be shaken by mere arguments anymore. And as for setting out to make converts, let alone presuming to redeem souls, does not the very notion require precisely the kind of overconfidence in one's beliefs that the Pyrrhonist method disavows so energetically?

Nor, in sharp contrast to the ways in which the skeptical suspension of judgment has often been imagined, was it ever meant to dissuade the Pyrrhonians from keeping up their search for the truth. On the contrary, they made a point of insisting that non-evident matters should always be looked into further—perhaps to be made evident one day—however unable the seeker for answers may have been to discover anything truly conclusive thus far.<sup>42</sup> In other words, the skeptical inquirer's commitment was neither to settling important questions nor to declaring them unanswerable or irrelevant, but instead to *keeping them open* at all times and sharpening his mind against them. As Dick Garner puts it so vividly, “The so-called quietude of skeptic thus begins to resemble the peace of the well-armed man, always on guard and ready for combat, though with a reasonable expectation of neither victory nor defeat.”<sup>43</sup>

In the meantime, while the battle for truth continues, so to speak, the skeptic's suspension of judgment is not meant to detract from the importance of carefully weighing the alternatives and their respective merits,<sup>44</sup> but only to

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experienced directly by the wise.” See also Machuca 2006: 116, 124, and Nussbaum 1994: 298 (“See what happens in your own case”).

<sup>41</sup> As against Frede 1987: 192.

<sup>42</sup> Compare Montaigne, *Essays* II.xii (2003: 451): “Pyrrho and the other skeptics say that they are still in search of the truth. These men judge that those who think they have found it are infinitely mistaken; and that there is also an overbold vanity in the latter group that keeps assuring us that human powers are not capable of attaining it.”

<sup>43</sup> Garner 1977: 166–67 (see also my discussion, in section IV, of quietism in its more political dimension). Before we dismiss the skeptic's tranquility as readily as Garner does (“so-called”), perhaps we should pause to consider the maxim, as old as the art of war itself, that the proper cultivation of arms is by no means the antithesis of peace, but rather its prerequisite: “Let him who desires peace prepare for war” (Vegetius, *Mil.*, preface to book III), a sentiment that likewise pervades every page of Sun Tzu.

<sup>44</sup> See also Frede 1987: 206 on how even the most thought-out views can be quite compatible with the skeptical outlook. To be sure, the Pyrrhonists' ongoing search for truth will no longer take the form of *craving* for the security of unshakable belief (cf. Frede 1987:

hold at bay the pervasive human habit of forming convictions on inadequate grounds, then getting attached, and finally clinging to whatever we happen to have invested ourselves in to the point where our judgment gets not only hopelessly clouded, but often blinded altogether.<sup>45</sup> Hence Montaigne, who so firmly espoused the Pyrrhonian teaching as an antidote to human presumption, at the same time defended it with brio against the charge of standing in the way of vigorous intellectual exploration,<sup>46</sup> and surely embodied the spirit of amused human curiosity to a singular extent.<sup>47</sup> Nor does the fact that a Pyrrhonian's mental positions are necessarily provisional and liable to change at any moment mean that they are therefore insignificant, any more than our scientific hypotheses are worthless because they are, in Popperian principle, liable to falsification.<sup>48</sup> Least of all does it mean that skeptics cannot learn from experience, or that they have no reasons for their actions just because those reasons are always open to revision in light of new thoughts or experiences.<sup>49</sup>

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199), but it is not at all obvious that a more balanced and detached mind should be a less keen and effective instrument of inquiry.

<sup>45</sup> As Frede rightly points out (1987: 210–11), the skeptic remains so ready to reconsider matters and to change his mind because he does not claim ownership over his impressions, therefore does not hold himself responsible for them, and consequently does not need to prove or defend them against others. Contrast his opposite, who, by giving a more active endorsement to some views over others, becomes invested, and who, because so much is at stake for him, cannot any longer give alternatives their full due or accept the weight of objections lest he jeopardize his own holdings.

<sup>46</sup> Thus Montaigne, *Essays* II.xii (2003: 454): “Only the fantastic, imaginary, false privilege that man has arrogated to himself of regimenting, arranging, and fixing the truth—that Pyrrho honestly renounced and gave up.” Surely Montaigne's example jumps to mind when one reads Olfert's description of the Pyrrhonian's suspension of judgment as “a state from which it is particularly easy to engage in further, active investigations”—thus promoting rather than impeding “a life of engaged and sincere intellectual activity” (Olfert 2015: 167). Compare *ibid.* 169 on skeptical investigation as far from a stale exercise, but rather “a genuinely engaging, deeply satisfying, and continuous life project,” and *ibid.* 155–56 and 166 on the Pyrrhonian spirit of *puzzled, but exacting, thorough, and ongoing examination*.

<sup>47</sup> Compare Montaigne, *Essays* II.xxix (2003: 647): “Pyrrho, who built such an *amusing* science out of ignorance” (*italics added*).

<sup>48</sup> The connection between Pyrrhonian provisional conclusions and scientific hypotheses is not as spurious as it may perhaps sound. Compare Kuzminski 2010: 107 (cf. 1, 4, 81), “An empirical, scientific outlook lies at the heart of the Pyrrhonian critique of dogmatism.”

<sup>49</sup> Cooper acknowledges the first but insists, as against the second, that the skeptics “never have any reasons for what they do, at all” (2012: 291–92, compare also 294, “for no reason at all”). His claim, just before, that “they do not have, or think they have, reasons

### III Equanimity, Not Dull Indifference

It is a prejudice of long standing that an equanimous state of suspended beliefs must be rather dull and “anemic,” perhaps to the point of “neutering” the mind in a way that threatens to be as irreversible as its physical equivalent.<sup>50</sup> Thus Gisela Striker expresses a typical suspicion when she speaks of the skeptic’s peace of mind as “*mere* detachment—a calm state indeed, but one that might in the end turn out to be also profoundly *boring*”—connecting it to the sedative effects of certain recreational drugs.<sup>51</sup> Martha Nussbaum too, taking her cue from the “laid-back” attitudes of more recent times, sees little more than a philosophical fig leaf for all manner of irresponsibility, lack of consideration for others, and relentless self-indulgence. The characteristic gesture of the skeptic as Nussbaum imagines him would be a *shrug* of indifference, his attitude one of profound lassitude: “I have no idea how the matter really stands, and *I don’t care*.”<sup>52</sup>

What gets lost in such translations into more contemporary terms, however, are all the ways in which Pyrrhonism is precisely *not* a philosophy of “letting oneself go.” While it is true that in its relation to non-evident matters, skeptical practice may indeed favor a measure of settling into the natural flow of things, the notion that its adherents would therefore forgo practical reason as a mere “source of painful vulnerability” and gladly trade the development of their mental faculties for “a life closer to that of a child

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*of a critically reflective kind*” sounds more reasonable but shifts the problem to what is meant by critical reflection.

<sup>50</sup> Thus Flintoff (1980: 95), for example, though the claim that “*ataraxia* is an anemic word” sits rather uneasily beside his own observation that it was taken from a military context (ibid. 96) where its implication were hardly bloodless in any sense. See also Frede’s insistence (1987: 179) that “full-blooded” might well be used as a skeptical epithet without constructing an oxymoron.

<sup>51</sup> Striker 1990: 102, 106–107. Burnyeat too (1980: 41–42) sees the skeptic’s life as “a hollow shell of the existence he enjoyed, and was troubled by, prior to his enlightenment. Such is the price of peace and tranquility.”

<sup>52</sup> Nussbaum 1994: 291, 293, 299. *Ataraxia*, in Nussbaum’s understanding (ibid. 306), “is not like the other ends we go for, with the help of belief; it is just there for us as things flow along.” The same sense of the skeptics being simply “swept along” by their habits of response is also a prominent feature of Cooper’s account (2012: 294, cf. 297), whereas equanimity practitioners would insist that things are just the other way around: such blind habitual responses are native to our condition and can only be *unlearned* through sustained meditative practice of some kind or other, including perhaps the Pyrrhonian.

at play—or of a dog or a bee” seems a little strained, to say the least.<sup>53</sup> After all, their relaxed acquiescence in what they took to be the realm of the evident in life went hand in hand, as they pointed out again and again, with their determination to live *rightly*, *naturally*, and *properly* in a simple and undogmatic manner<sup>54</sup>—in accordance with the demands of nature and the strictures of our ordinary human perceptions, thoughts, and emotional reactions, suitably tempered; circumscribed by the bounds of everyday morality as expressed in established customs and social conventions; and with the benefit of the expertise accumulated by the arts and sciences at any given time.<sup>55</sup>

Nussbaum concludes her account by imagining the skeptic “standing alone,” isolated from friends, family, and loved ones, even amicable neighbors.<sup>56</sup> Yet all the evidence we have about Pyrrho suggests that he was, on the contrary, held in the highest regard by his neighbors on account of his remarkably stable, sociable, and solicitous temperament. As we have seen, Diogenes Laertius reported that Pyrrho would go into seclusion at times and not show himself even to his family members, but there is no suggestion that this was done for lack of sociability; on the contrary, it is stressed in the same context how ready he always was to make new friends.<sup>57</sup> As for the passionate and romantic love that has been the focal point for so many Western guru-and-ganja pilgrims, Pyrrho may very well have abstained, though even there we can hardly be sure. Just because we hear that instead of getting married he lived in strict chastity *with his sister* (a midwife, let it be noted, not a wallflower),<sup>58</sup> we can hardly conclude that he must therefore have been

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<sup>53</sup> One-upped by Annas & Barnes’s reference to *homo insipiens* “advertising a return to the ant-age” (2000: xxv). Against this line, see especially Smith’s discussion of how Pyrrhonian “relativity” should by no means be mistaken for total indifference or total tolerance, and that skeptical suspension of judgment does not suppress real values, but may in fact bring them out more reliably and naturally than the overly theoretical dogmatic commitments that often pass for high principles in our world (Smith 2022: 344–48).

<sup>54</sup> Nussbaum does recognize, at least, how little there was in Pyrrhonism to make its adherents recoil from the ordinary or incline them towards the kind of counter-culture for which she finds an early example among the *Epicureans* (Nussbaum 1994: 290, 294). She does not see Pyrrhonist proto-hippies; she sees couch potatoes.

<sup>55</sup> Sext. Emp. *Pyr.* I.viii.17, I.xi.23–24, I.xxxiv.237. Those who kept ignoring this crucial dimension of the skeptical practice, Sextus sighed, “seem to me not to have listened to what we have been saying” (Sext. Emp. *Pyr.* I.x.19).

<sup>56</sup> Nussbaum 1994: 315.

<sup>57</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.63.

<sup>58</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.66.

celibate in all respect.<sup>59</sup> It may be so; but there is nothing to rule out that he lived instead in the more discreet manner of the past, as Montaigne intimates: “He did not want to make himself a stone or a stump; he was a living, thinking, reasoning man who enjoyed *all* natural comforts and pleasures and used *all* his bodily and spiritual faculties in a regular and upright fashion.”<sup>60</sup>

Whatever debt Pyrrho's philosophy may or may not owe to his Eastern travels, the most reliable basis for comparison between the skeptical and the Buddhist paths is not such uncertain historical linkages, plausible as they may be, but the common orientation that both practices have towards equanimity—not as the final goal, but as the gateway to a freer, better life. Thus Stephen Batchelor: “*Ataraxia*, coming to rest in a still and untroubled state of mind, is strikingly similar to the experience of *nirvana* as radiant, open-hearted *equanimity* that is unconditioned by the reactive fires of greed, hatred, and delusion... When no longer troubled by opinion and the resultant disturbing emotions, one is freed to respond to situations in creative, spontaneous, and unpredictable ways.”<sup>61</sup>

Since few of us have much occasion, presumably, to interact with demonstrably enlightened beings,<sup>62</sup> it is understandable that we would have our questions and doubts as to the precise nature of their equanimity, even serious reservations about its desirability in the first place. It would still be a mistake, however, to think that practitioners of detachment must be led by their practices to go through life not feeling things fully, not valuing or cherishing anything or anyone. Equanimity in the deeper, liberating sense is not about losing interest in things and no longer caring about people, but about curbing and curtailing our *excessive* desires of the *strained and grasping* kind, as McPherran puts it, and as Sextus too made quite clear in his less polemical moments.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> As against Beckwith 2015: 46.

<sup>60</sup> Montaigne, *Essays* II.xii (2003: 454), italics added for emphasis.

<sup>61</sup> Batchelor 2016: 16–17. Compare *ibid.* 19: “The philosophical scepticism found in both Buddhist and Western thought ... was not metaphysical but ethical in orientation, first and foremost a *practice*. When internalized at the core of one's life, it culminated in the experience of *ataraxia/nirvana*, which was not an end in itself, but opened up radically new possibilities of being in the world.” See also Beckwith 2015: 33, “Complete equanimity is exactly the same as *ataraxia*.”

<sup>62</sup> Burnyeat's account makes it particularly clear and explicit that the Pyrrhonist practice amounted to a journey towards enlightenment (Burnyeat 1980: 24).

<sup>63</sup> McPherran 1989: 159. Hence the emphasis that Sextus puts on the *eager* (or rather, overeager) pursuit and avoidance of what human beings usually consider good and bad



The momentary texture of the thoughts, feelings, and sensations that happen to pass through the mind at any given time is not the measure of equanimity for the serious practitioner, nor how quietly or noisily they make themselves known and felt; the only true yardstick of advanced practice is the combination of acuity, detachment, and insight into the impermanent nature of things with which these transient phenomena are observed as they arise and pass away<sup>64</sup>—a suspension of judgment, one might say, not only at the level of opinions or beliefs, but all the way down, to the point where, in the true neutral position of perfect mental equipoise, all passes through the mind as over a smooth surface that detains nothing with craving or clinging, and repels nothing with aversion.<sup>65</sup> To think that this state must resemble the neutral setting on the gear box, hence leading only to inaction and inertia, not the clear-headed and caring action that its adherents claim for it, would be to imagine that the noisy propellers of craving and aversion are the only way for things to get moved along by self-aware human beings, while the solar engine of loving-kindness counts for nothing.<sup>66</sup> McPherran, without wishing to vindicate the Pyrrhonist, captures well how *ataraxia* is understood by those who aspire to equanimity, namely as “an unimpeded state of natural *activity*—in contrast to being in an unhappy, *impeded* state of anxiety.”<sup>67</sup> Thus a state of being in which looking out for others comes rather more naturally than before.<sup>68</sup>

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things, and the *excessive* joy and *anxiety* or *distress* (alternating between states of *exaltation* and *depression*) to which this pattern of behavior cannot but give rise (Sex. Emp. *Math.* xi.112, 116, 118, 126, 146). Compare also Smith 2022: 348.

<sup>64</sup> Assuming an observer’s perspective towards one’s own experience, one might say, or that of a *reporter*, as Sextus puts it (Sext. Emp. *Pyr.* I.i.4).

<sup>65</sup> Compare McEvelley 1982: 4, “The skeptic’s ‘suspension’ solidifies into an inner balance in which the mind neither affirms nor denies, neither grasps at some impressions nor pushes others away. This balance ... ripens finally into freedom from phenomenal influence (non-reactiveness) and imperturbability (*ataraxia*), in which the mind experiences each present moment without either attachment or aversion.”

<sup>66</sup> See my discussion in section IV.

<sup>67</sup> McPherran 1987: 292, 324, italics added. Given how much McPherran’s account gets right, it is surprising that he would fall back upon the idea that “the price of experience and existence is an interaction with the world that prevents the soul from attaining complete equanimity” (1989: 164).

<sup>68</sup> Against Nussbaum’s contention (1994: 306) that “no connection has been made out between helping others and being free of disturbance oneself,” one might insist on the nexus as a fundamental principle of Adlerian psychology. Thus Adler 2014: 185 (Charakterlehre 2.1), “The very mood of giving, supporting, and helping automatically brings with it an equanimous and harmonious state of mind, while those who are oriented towards taking



The notion that deepening equanimity would come at the expense of our feelings may stem in large part from popular ideas about the experience of awakening or enlightenment imagined as a blissful state free of all unpleasant sensations. On our everyday understanding, after all, a “pain” that did not trouble us could hardly be called by that name, and it would be difficult to understand, if not altogether unintelligible, how an ostensibly liberated being like the Buddha could be said *both* to have broken free of suffering for good *and* to have been liable to back pains as he got older,<sup>69</sup> let alone how he could have endured with a smile any of the tormenting pangs that afflict lesser mortals when they die of dysentery, as he did, after eating a dish of bad mushrooms or spoilt pork.<sup>70</sup> Yet being “totally engrossed” and being “radically dissociated” are not necessarily the opposites that they appear to be on the surface,<sup>71</sup> but rather, potentially at least, two modes of relating to one's inner states that could be combined (or so tradition and meditative experience would suggest) in certain kinds of awakened experience to which some Pyrrhonists too may have been privy.

The key to the conundrum lies in realizing that even the most powerful sensations *can* be observed with detachment and dispassion, and that when a mind sufficiently steeped in equanimity does so (having learnt to see them as nothing but a stream of ephemeral phenomena, changing every instant), the grounds for identification are dissolved, so that what was so unbearable

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usually carry scattered minds, are dissatisfied and always obsessed with what they still need to accomplish and acquire in order to become happy.”

<sup>69</sup> On resting his back, see *Anguttara Nikaya* 9.4 (2012: 1251), *Digha Nikaya* 33.1.5 (1995: 480), *Majjhima Nikaya* 53.5 (2005: 461); on napping, see *Majjhima Nikaya* 36.45–46 (2005: 342).

<sup>70</sup> *Digha Nikaya* 16.4.17–21 (1995: 256–57). The canonical account is explicit that there were “sharp pains as if he were about to die” (ibid. 16.4.20) and that the Buddha was *wearied* by them (ibid. 16.4.21), both 1995: 257. This clear acknowledgment must be placed, however, alongside the Buddha's teaching on the two “darts of painful feeling,” one physical, the other mental (*Samyutta Nikaya* 36.6 [6] (2000: 1263–65)), according to which the root of our torments is not so much any painful sensation itself, but the mental reaction to it (thus also Sext. Emp. Pyr. I.xii.30, *Math.* xi.157–60). At a deeper level still, the whole chain of becoming (in the twelve-link cycle of *dependent origination* of which the Pali canon says that he who sees it sees all of the Dhamma (*Majjhima Nikaya* 28.29 (2005: 282)) can supposedly be broken, as the Vipassana tradition emphasizes especially, just after *contact* with the *sense doors* produces *sensations*—if, instead of *reacting* with the usual *craving* and *aversion*, one can learn to observe the ever-changing inner landscape with equanimity.

<sup>71</sup> Thorsrud 2009: 188.

before, so *pain-full*, is emptied of its miseries without therefore having to disappear, indeed while being more clearly and sharply perceived than ever.<sup>72</sup> Contrary to the more familiar experience of being under the numbing influence of tranquilizing drugs, the senses in this state are by no means dulled or deadened, but made to work more acutely than ever. Even *nibbana* itself marks the cessation of *suffering* only, not of sensation.<sup>73</sup> The sense of ownership simply falls away,<sup>74</sup> and with that small but profound shift in perspective, the perennial burden of creaturely suffering lifts, dispelling even the faint undercurrent of dissatisfaction that runs even beneath our happiest moments. That is the core discovery, if one credits it, around which 2500 years of Buddhist traditions have since sprung up.

#### IV Loving-Kindness

Equanimity practices aim by their very nature at purifying and unburdening the mind, and one might think of them as long-term laundry cycles designed to remove, bit by bit, the stains of desire, aversion, and ignorance that adhere to our grosser and more self-regarding emotions. From there it might seem only a small step to imagining that the solvent of equanimity might wash out, along with the unrulier emotions, the promptings of love itself, as if they were just another noisy disturbance. Hence it has been argued that when Pyrrho showed himself from his caring side, it must have

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<sup>72</sup> Compare McEvilley 1982: 18.

<sup>73</sup> Whether the Pyrrhonist technique of “analytical meditation” (McEvilley 1982: 17) would have really taken its practitioners to the depths of detachment that are said to be necessary for breaking free, even for a moment, of *all* traces of dissatisfaction, I do not presume to say. I must therefore suspend judgment on whether *ataraxia* can really be equated with *nibbana* in the strict sense (as against McEvilley 1982: 16–17, Batchelor 2016: 16–17, 19, and Kuzminski 2010: 104, 113). For it is only *complete* equanimity, as Beckwith rightly points out, that leads to *nibbana*, which is defined as a moment where suffering is extinguished *entirely*, though perhaps only for an instant. Such perfect liberation is not usually claimed for Pyrrhonist *ataraxia*, however, and explicitly not by Beckwith (cf. 2015: 33, and 154: “undoubtedly not perfectly free, but free enough.”)

<sup>74</sup> Kuzminski recognizes (2010: 104–105) that Buddhist liberation is *not* “equivalent to the extinction of sensory or thought experience”; but since he also insists that thoughts and feelings “belong to us inalienably” and therefore shows little interest in the connection between equanimity and non-reactivity (ibid. 11, 107), he cannot account very convincingly for how even exceedingly unpleasant thoughts and feelings could become not only bearable, but lose the taint of suffering altogether.

been because he had reached his limits and the emotional remnants of his personality were triumphing over his philosophy.<sup>75</sup>

Yet love of the universal as against the self-regarding kind (so hopelessly confounded, in English especially, with the interested attachments of advantageous friendship, passionate romance, and kinship ties<sup>76</sup>) does not, to the equanimity-minded, look like a mental defilement at all, but like the very fount of purity that will flow freely once the mental impediments have been cleared away.<sup>77</sup> What is more, the connection between a peaceful and a loving mind is not only an article of faith, or a creedal commitment, but also a matter of empirical observation, and as such could, and would, have been accepted by the skeptics not as a dogma, but as something they had come to experience first-hand, like *ataraxia* itself, and that they could therefore invite others to try out for themselves.<sup>78</sup>

The all-too familiar human capacity for unconcern over the problems of others so long as they do not intrude too aggressively upon one's narrow field of vision, describes far more of our everyday condition than most of us would be comfortable admitting; but to associate this unflattering state of affairs with *ataraxia*, of all things, gets things the wrong way around. It is our ordinary, unbalanced, agitated state of mind to which disturbance by others is such a threat, because it would stir up further the mental perturbations that are already afflicting us. What the cultivation of equanimity to any noteworthy degree<sup>79</sup> promises instead is quite the contrary, namely a way of getting to the other side, the opposite shore where one is relieved, among

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<sup>75</sup> Thus Nussbaum 1994: 315, "Even Pyrrho had his limits... Some love, not altogether cut away, prevents the complete triumph of philosophy."

<sup>76</sup> See McPherran's clear-sighted account of what is meant by love for mankind in the skeptical sense, namely a *calm, confident, tolerant, gentle care for others, universal in scope and realistic in expectation, that is both natural and motivational, and hence something to be relied on*, thus "utterly unlike the crazed, anxious, deluded, and inconsistent sort of infatuation that goes by the name of 'love' in some cultures" (McPherran 1987: 325–26, 1989: 165–66).

<sup>77</sup> Compare Thoreau's memorable formulation in *Walden* (2017: 196): "Love flows freely when the channel of purity is open."

<sup>78</sup> Thus McEvelley 1982: 18, "It might be objected that there is too little of the ethic of compassion and loving-kindness in Sextus, but that is merely apparent. As a modern Zen teacher explains, 'Love is the natural functioning of wisdom.' The skeptics made the same discovery."

<sup>79</sup> Compare Sosa 2013: 6–7, "Tranquility comes in degrees [and] Pyrrhonism can help even if it does not yield absolute *ataraxia*, so long as one attains more of it."

other things, of the feeble habit of shrinking from others and retreating into unsociability upon every slight provocation for fear of one's own frail balance of mind.<sup>80</sup> To show no signs of such a transformation is to provide the most robust evidence that one cannot have gotten very far on the Path. Hence the early Pyrrhonists kept insisting to anyone who would listen that their *ataraxia* implied *gentleness*, and by no means the *insensibility* that their rivals and detractors kept attributing to it.<sup>81</sup>

The old story about an insult to Pyrrho's sister to which he took vehement exception shows that the same misperceptions were just as rife then as they are now. Against those who imagined that equanimity must dispose one to remaining blindly insensitive and unmoved by anything, even as a householder with definite responsibilities to others, Pyrrho pointed out the obvious: this was not the time to practice his powers of non-reaction since it would have come at the expense of someone requiring protection.<sup>82</sup> For his own part, he had arrived at such self-control, it is said, that he could undergo surgery without a flinch or a frown, no small accomplishment in ancient times especially.<sup>83</sup> We can be sure that he would have been ready to pass over any personal slights directed *at him* as not worthy of a philosopher's attention—as when facing no end of raillery directed at him by the gentlemen of his day because he would, to relieve his sister, carry livestock to market, clean the house, or wash the pigs.<sup>84</sup> On behalf of someone in his charge, however, a woman who could not easily defend herself and whose position in life depended far more than any man's on her unsullied reputation, Pyrrho's anger was not only understandable but entirely appropriate. Shrugging off the injury *to her* would not have been philosophical at all, in a skeptic or anyone else, but plainly uncaring and irresponsible.

It has been variously mooted since ancient times that if a despotic ruler were to send a message commanding a skeptic to “commit some

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<sup>80</sup> As against the line of argument traced by Annas 1993: 244–48, Machuca (2006: 134–36), Bett (2019: 163), and most egregiously, Pohlenz 1904: 24, “Here before us, a man who ducks for cover behind a wall of cautious restraint lest any adversary disturb his mental peace, etc.” Such shirkers are not unknown on the paths of life, but they cannot claim the mantle of the Pyrrhonist or the Buddhist teaching.

<sup>81</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.108.

<sup>82</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.66.

<sup>83</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.67.

<sup>84</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.66.

unspeakable deed,” on pain of his family being made to pay for his refusal, he would remain *undisturbed*.<sup>85</sup> If we take this to mean that an individual trained in equanimity, when facing such a dire threat, would keep a cooler, less fearful head than others in his predicament, and would be able to bear up better under hardship if necessary, fair enough; so one would hope.<sup>86</sup> But if what is meant is that he would have no sound reasons for a determined opposition to the tyrant's demand, or that he would act with less resolve on account of his philosophy, then it is a plain misconstrual of what the Pyrrhonists taught, or what equanimity implies.

There is nothing “profoundly ambiguous” about the answer Sextus gave to the time-worn challenge, namely that there is no great need for philosophical subtleties on this point, but that everyday notions provide quite enough guidance against tyrannical practices.<sup>87</sup> As the very terms “tyrant” and “unspeakable” should alert us, what is at stake here is not so much individual belief as a violation of fundamental decencies that are backed by

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<sup>85</sup> Cf. Sext. Emp. *Math.* xi.164; for a contemporary formulation see Burnyeat 1980: 40–41. Such overheated charges beset Pyrrhonism from the earliest days: “The dogmatists argue that the skeptic, on his principles, would not shrink from killing and eating his father if ordered to do so” (Diog. Laert. *Pyr.* ix.108).

<sup>86</sup> Sext. Emp. *Math.* xi.166. When the Thirty commanded Socrates to bring them Leon of Salamis (Pl. *Ap.* 32c–d), is it not a big part of the power of the example he gave that he seems *not* to have been perturbed, but that he simply ignored the command and went home? Compare also Hadot 1995: 274, “There is an equilibrium—almost impossible to achieve—between the inner peace brought about by wisdom, and the passions to which the sight of the injustices, sufferings, and miseries of mankind cannot help but give rise. Wisdom consists in precisely such an equilibrium, however, and inner peace is indispensable for efficacious action.”

<sup>87</sup> As against Nussbaum 1994: 314. Not that the Pyrrhonist's outlook should be too readily equated with that of the “man on the street,” of course. Though willing to credit sensible commonplaces in everyday life, the skeptic does not take the next step of attributing any *truth* to these prevailing ideas, and what is more, he remains at all times acutely aware that he could be entirely wrong about how things appear to him and his neighbors. Unlike them, highbrow or lowbrow, he can tolerate without anxiety the idea that things could be completely different; he has shed all “dogmatic craving for the security of true belief,” no longer imagines that he must possess “the real truth” for his life to go well, and therefore frees himself from “the temptation to expect more from reason and philosophical thinking than these can provide, without, on the other hand, coming to hold reason in contempt” (compare Frede 1987: 198, 199, 200; Bett 2019: 178). See also Adler 2010: 27, “I do not believe myself to be bound by any fixed rules or prejudices, and I always hold to the principle that *everything could well be different*.” Likewise Suzuki 1999: 159, “The secret of the perfect Zen statement is ‘It is not always so.’”

our ordinary emotional reactions to things, that are enshrined in civilized human customs, and that require no lengthy rationalizations. It is a simple matter of protecting oneself and others from harm, as all living beings do when they can, and of expressing through action (again in a perfectly normal and natural human fashion) one's sympathy with the miseries of those who suffer abuse, as well as any ordinary human being's revulsion at violations of lawful, orderly, and responsible behavior. More elaborate belief systems are hardly required to sustain these straightforward moral imperatives, and the history of such elaborations being used on the side of rationalizing and making excuses for wicked practices is not a heartening one.<sup>88</sup>

Sextus's language, designed not to strike any note that might be misread to suggest dogmatic commitments, may not always inspire the greatest confidence in the skeptic's ethical capacities, and his "perchance" in this context has been read, by Nussbaum especially, as a particularly telling shrug of apathy and ethical equivocation.<sup>89</sup> Yet it need not be taken in that sense at all: what Sextus meant to remind us of is the reality, as unwelcome as it is inescapable, that we cannot be sure of *anyone* in such trying circumstances, nor even certain of what the right course of action would be when we face impossible choices, such as the one between doing the right thing by our fellow citizens or by our loved ones, when one must come at the other's expense.<sup>90</sup> The most reliable characters in such quandaries are not always, and indeed not usually, those who make the grandest professions out of season. What Bett alleges about the skeptic is sadly true of everyone: it is "overwhelmingly likely" that any of us, under duress, let alone under torture, would forget our commitments of happier days in order to get out of the immediate agony.<sup>91</sup> What Sextus insists on in the passage is no more (and no less) than that the Pyrrhonist's equanimity may well prove a match for

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<sup>88</sup> For the Pyrrhonist, by contrast, there can be no rationalizing away the immediate horrors of state-sponsored savagery, and no justifying anything by the usual creedal grandstanding (Kuzminski 2010: 106).

<sup>89</sup> Sext. Emp. *Math.* xi.166; Nussbaum 1994: 314.

<sup>90</sup> Compare Kuzminski 2010: 107; also McPherran 1989: 162, "No one can say in advance which inner force will dominate in such a situation and nothing that a dogmatist says or believes will give us better than a 'perchance' prediction of what choice will actually be made." See also the insightful extension of the same logic to soldiering, where it is likewise impossible to predict who might flee a battle (McPherran places his bets on the skeptical soldier, McPherran 1989: 168). That the skeptic in war will be less likely to lose sight of the fact that the enemy's cause might be as just as his own should surely recommend him to us.

<sup>91</sup> Bett 2019: 161.

the noisy but untested commitments of others,<sup>92</sup> and that the skeptic may turn out to be as willing to face, and possibly better able to endure, any punishment or hardship meted out to him.<sup>93</sup>

As for the excessive quietism and conformism that some accounts attribute to the skeptics' way of life,<sup>94</sup> it is hard to see how their alleged habit of accepting established social practices *without any question at all* would be compatible with their constant practice of philosophical investigation.<sup>95</sup> It may be that the skeptic gives an unduly quiescent and compliant impression by our prevailing standards of loud and indignant self-assertion, especially around political matters, but the question here is one of appropriate comparisons. "Moral or other revolutionaries they decidedly are not," as Cooper wryly observes.<sup>96</sup> Indeed so; but is that not because the dogmatic self-assurance that is very nearly the *sine qua non* of the revolutionary's outlook must appear not only dangerous in its likely consequences, but above all terribly *ill-founded* to the skeptic? At a safe remove from such dogmatic prescriptions, skeptics are by no means averse to trying new things, as Cooper acknowledges himself, nor do they deny that such novel ways might end up "going better" than the old.<sup>97</sup> The skeptic would differ mostly in espousing a spirit of principled reserve, not zealous expectation—being ready enough for experiments to be tried if there is a good preliminary case for them, but never convinced that any of them must succeed on grounds of this or that over-confident prediction, as is so often the case in the world.

That skeptics must maintain a "very delicate balance" in following their way of life is well-observed by Cooper.<sup>98</sup> What characterizes their balancing act, however, is not so much any worry about what might happen if they should ever fail to find countervailing arguments on the skeptical highwire,<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Compare also Kuzminski 2010: 107.

<sup>93</sup> One of Timon's students, Praulus of Troad, was said to have given a particularly celebrated example of just such endurance when he was unjustly put to death for treason (Inwood & Gerson 1997: 299).

<sup>94</sup> See especially Cooper 2012: 296–98.

<sup>95</sup> Cooper offers the two practically in the same breath at the top of p. 298 (*ibid.*).

<sup>96</sup> Cooper 2012: 297.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Cooper 2012: 300.

<sup>99</sup> Cooper 2012: 302–303. Just why should the tranquility-minded skeptics, of all people, be disposed to concerns of the "what if" kind, whose propensity to induce anxiety is notorious in therapeutic circles?



but rather the manner in which they manage to retain their allegiance to philosophy long after they have been disappointed in their “love affair”.<sup>100</sup> On the one hand relentlessly turning their faculties against any and all seemingly strong positions that cannot be made truly secure, on the other hand they forever keep up the search for better footholds, perhaps not so much because they can really still hope to succeed,<sup>101</sup> but because they actually live by something that others know only from the philosophy textbook, if at all: namely the “black swan problem” that even if one had examined millions of philosophical arguments without finding a single sound one,<sup>102</sup> still it would not prove anything for the next one up, which might turn out valid no matter how unintuitive and unlikely the prospect may seem.<sup>103</sup>

That all said, it must of course be admitted that a Pyrrhonian ethics cannot be as theoretically rigorous or systematic as moral philosophers have generally demanded, though also not as indeterminate, or even incoherent, as they have often alleged.<sup>104</sup> Such an ethic would be described with more justice, in Emidio Spinelli’s words, as a continual “confession of one’s inner affections” by one’s outward actions<sup>105</sup>—revealed moment-to-moment and always liable to change, but held together by an evolved personality and sensibility that is embedded in all kinds of causal relationships, past and present, individual and social, and constrained not by absolute moral commandments and imperatives, but by pragmatic precepts suggested by tradition, common sense, and personal experience.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Cooper 2012: 299–300.

<sup>101</sup> Cooper twice invokes their “continued hope of success” (2012: 300, 302), but this after acknowledging how much their “fully committed acceptance of the authority of reason and philosophy” has been shaken (299–300): “Their experience in philosophy has left them with the strong impression, which they cannot but accept, so strong is it, that critical reason does not lead to any decisive result, and, to all appearances, will never succeed in doing so.”

<sup>102</sup> Cooper 2012: 301.

<sup>103</sup> Thus Sext. *Emp. Pyr.* II.xv.204 on the problem of induction, said to be the first known argument of its kind, and of course Hume, *Treatise* I.iii.6 (1985: 136–37) on how the repetition of any past experience, even to infinity, cannot prove that the next instance, which we have not yet experienced, will resemble the previous ones.

<sup>104</sup> Compare Spinelli 2015: 28, “While the Pyrrhonist neither possesses nor seeks to possess any ethical belief of absolute validity, he can still construct a coherent and justifiable moral world for himself.”

<sup>105</sup> Spinelli 2015: 22, 2020: 26.

<sup>106</sup> Compare Spinelli 2012: 112–13; 2015: 23–24, 27; 2020: 26–27. For “precepts” specifically, see Spinelli 2012: 116.



How attractive such an ethic will be found besides the alternatives remains highly debatable,<sup>107</sup> and a Pyrrhonian would have it no other way, since the competing merits of different approaches to life make for such a complex matrix of comparison that the question must surely be placed among the inconclusive ones about which judgment is best suspended.<sup>108</sup> When one characterizes the Pyrrhonian ethical outlook this way, who would not be struck by its parallels, on the one hand, with the precepts (or “training rules”) of the Buddhists, together with their conception of meditative practice as a path through life,<sup>109</sup> and their subtle understanding of no-self; and, on the other hand, with the spirit of relaxed doubt that pervades a thousand pages of Montaigne’s essays.<sup>110</sup>

## V No-Self

The nearly unshakable prejudice that ethically reliable behavior must be anchored in some kind of *robust self*, and that the skeptic’s orientation toward himself is too *pared down* or *unanchored* to be trustworthy,<sup>111</sup> is hardly surprising given how prone we all are to identify wholeheartedly with our

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<sup>107</sup> Compare Spinelli’s “perhaps not a very solid [ethical] habit (since it is not rooted in an inflexible dogma), nor a particularly attractive one” (2015: 29). His verdict must be set beside the even more unattractive aspects of that “militant intervention of rationality,” however, by which dogmatists are so often ready to dismiss other stances as inappropriate, self-indulgent, or solipsistic (2015: 18, 2020: 111).

<sup>108</sup> Spinelli’s “play of questions” (2015: 27–28), wherein he cleverly juxtaposes various kinds of skeptical and dogmatic sons that a father might wish to have (in view of the notorious tyrant’s order), itself amounts to a Pyrrhonian exercise that issues not in any ringing endorsement, but in showing how difficult it would be to say with any confidence that one or the other must be better, hence how much wiser it would be to withhold one-sided judgments in the face of such daunting moral complexities.

<sup>109</sup> Compare Spinelli 2015: 24 (italics added for emphasis), “This moral and empirical *itinerary* followed by the Pyrrhonist, which is connected to specific situations and historically conditioned, nonetheless allows his *journey* to be a peaceful one.”

<sup>110</sup> Thus Montaigne, *Essays* I.xxvi (2003: 132), “I offer what I believe, not what is to be believed. I am here only at revealing myself, who will perhaps be different tomorrow, if I learn something new that changes me. I have no authority to be believed, nor do I want it.” Compare Spinelli 2015: 22, 2020: 26 for some suggestive comments on the persuasive power of such “lived confessions.”

<sup>111</sup> Bett 2019: 145, 147, 152.

thoughts and feelings, in the deep conviction that such individuation makes us unique and distinctive and underpins our dignity as human beings.<sup>112</sup>

The skeptic, by contrast, having none of the typical beliefs in the ultimate goodness or badness of things, and not being invested in a particular view of himself either, but taking an observer's position toward his own actions and inclinations too—"watching them unfold as if it was not him to which they were happening at all"<sup>113</sup>—must arouse correspondingly deep suspicions. For does it not follow, from being thus disengaged, that nothing can really matter to a skeptic, and that his vaunted freedom from worry is acquired simply by not caring about anything?<sup>114</sup> Would he not be ready to "change allegiance" all-too easily: from his skeptical philosophy to pill-popping, for example, as Richard Bett puts it, if Prozac offered a more promising path to *ataraxia*?<sup>115</sup>

What gets lost in the laughter is how often we become so attached to our techniques in life, long past their helpfulness, that the Pyrrhonist's readiness to change tack cannot be dismissed so lightly. To resist the use of pills that truly solve our problems in life, for instance, would not be admirable but foolish; we have good reasons to hold out against medical remedies *for our human condition* not as a matter of mere habit, but because we may harbor legitimate doubts as to whether the chemical options before us really amount to a genuine solution, rather than a mere palliative and distraction from the underlying issues—which the Pyrrhonist, being less invested in a particular view of himself, might be that much freer to tackle head-on. It is easier, in sum, to mock the skeptic for being "no more than a bundle of natural and social dispositions"<sup>116</sup> than to demonstrate (rather than merely to assert in belief) what substance there is, or could be, to our fuzzy notions about supposedly abiding selves that have a way of slipping through our fingers whenever we try to pin them down.

We all recognize without difficulty the deep-seated intuition, nay the generally unshakable conviction, that there must, behind the flux of our sensory experiences, be some unifying core—some truly abiding self—around which the chaos of sentience can coalesce and become coherent. While denial of just such a core has been for more than two millennia the Archimedean

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<sup>112</sup> Bett 2019: 149.

<sup>113</sup> Bett 2019: 179.

<sup>114</sup> Bett 2019: 143, 179.

<sup>115</sup> Bett 2019: 146.

<sup>116</sup> Bett 2019: 160, 178.

point of the Buddhists,<sup>117</sup> even they have always conceded that the *belief* in self is so tenacious that its last traces will not be dissolved, even among the most advanced practitioners, before they have arrived at the very end of the Path and attained full liberation. Until then, the residual scent (or stink) of self is bound to linger, as the Suttas put it so vividly, like the smell of detergent on fresh laundry long after it has been thoroughly washed.<sup>118</sup>

Perhaps more conclusively from a Western philosophical perspective, David Hume, the very thinker invoked by Burnyeat as he passes his final sentence of impossibility on Pyrrhonism,<sup>119</sup> was also the one who made perhaps the strongest case on the books for recognizing that our sentient experience amounts to “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions that succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux and movement”—thus not only arguing along lines to which Buddhists can readily assent, but offering a conclusion they would find equally congenial:

The mind is a kind of theatre where perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no simplicity in it at any one time, nor identity in different, whatever natural propensity we have to imagine that simplicity and identity.<sup>120</sup>

The self in which we believe so fervently may turn out, in other words, to be nothing more than a contrived principle of connection that the mind supplies, or indeed *feigns* as Hume contended, on account of certain irresistible propensities of the human imagination to which we succumb so

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<sup>117</sup> See *Samyutta Nikaya* 22.95 (2000: 951–52) and 35.234 (2000: 1233) on the Buddha's metaphor of a banana tree whose layers can be unrolled one by one without revealing any heartwood at their core.

<sup>118</sup> *Samyutta Nikaya* 22.89 (2000: 945). The Buddha had less fragrant odors in mind, since the ancient solvents did not only include salts and lye, but also urine and even cow-dung.

<sup>119</sup> Thus Burnyeat 1980: 53, “Hume and the ancient critics were right: when one has seen how radically the skeptic must detach himself from himself, one will agree that the supposed life without belief is not, after all, a possible life for man.” Compare McEvilley's observation, in a footnote (1982: 33, no. 44), that Burnyeat's “remarkable conclusion” amounts to declaring the Buddhist realization of *anatta* (no-self) through mindfulness practice either impossible or inhuman—thus dismissing 2500 years of meditative insight with the stroke of a pen.

<sup>120</sup> Hume, *Treatise* I.iv.7 (1985: 300–301).

quickly and easily that we never even become aware of what is happening. All we are doing, if Hume was right, is to *confound relation with identity*: there is, in the end, *nothing to be found* in what we are experiencing *that could justify our notion of identity*, no matter how adamant our conviction to the contrary.<sup>121</sup> The process whereby we solidify the self, from an impersonal process to a thing with which we identify completely and upon which we focus our most intense attachments—and at what a price in misery!—has also caught the attention, in recent years, of neuroscientists and neuropsychologists.<sup>122</sup>

For our purposes it should suffice to end with an open question: what would happen if we could learn to suspend what may turn out, upon closer scrutiny, to be our most dubious judgment of all? For as the Buddhists have been telling us for 2500 years on the strength of practical personal experience, the equanimity to be discovered by such a suspension, if only it goes deep enough, may allow us to cut our suffering at the very root—not at the expense of the heart and in opposition to an active engagement with the world, as we are wont to fear, but on the contrary, as the gateway to a more energetic and flourishing life.

## VI Conclusion

It should come as no great surprise to discover that so radical a sceptic as Pyrrho would be hard to pin down, especially when our source materials are scant and stand in such need of interpretation. Nonetheless, as this essay hopes to have shown, the figure of Pyrrho was not quite as shadowy as he has often appeared, nor his philosophy as obscure or outlandish. He taught a practical way of life that cannot, perhaps, simply be equated with kindred Eastern teachings, but that may still be better understood with the help of such comparisons. The evidence, fragmentary as it is, does suggest that Pyrrho and his students maintained a mindfulness practice that contemporary students of Buddhism might still recognize; the breakthrough to Pyrrhonian *ataraxia* has some interesting parallels with what is referred to as *satori* in Zen; and equanimity seems to have been the focus of Pyrrhonist practice much as it is in Vipassana to this day—nothing to do with dull indifference, but rather with cultivating a vibrant and balanced mind

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<sup>121</sup> Hume, *Treatise* I.iv.7 (1985: 302–303).

<sup>122</sup> See for example Damásio 2012 and Niebauer 2019.

capable of detached and profound loving-kindness towards other. Finally, the thinning out of self-concern that has sometimes been diagnosed as a signal failing of Pyrrhonism, looks, upon closer inspection, quite a bit like the central Buddhist doctrine of no-self, or *anatta*. All this may not suffice for making a Western Buddhist of Pyrrho, though such arguments have been ably advanced by others to no small effect; for the purposes of this essay, however, it is enough to conclude that he stood for a coherent, credible way of life that was by no means dull and disengaged, as it has sometimes been misconstrued, but lovingly and joyfully equanimous.

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