

Was Pyrrho the Founder of Skepticism?²

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The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism, edited by Richard Bett, consists of an Introduction and fifteen papers written by international authors (three of them have been diligently translated into English by the editor). The volume presents the major figures of ancient skepticism and the major interpretational problems. Separate papers are devoted to Pyrrho of Elis (Svavar Hrafn Svavarsson), Arcesilaus and Carneades (Harald Thorsrud), Aenesidemus (R.J. Hankinson) and Sextus Empiricus (Pierre Pellegrin). Agrippa seems to be the only missing figure on the list. Moreover, we can also find a lot of information about the minor figures of ancient skepticism. Mi-Kyoung Lee presents skeptical ideas in early Greek philosophy and Carlos Levy writes about the later academic skeptics, especially Clitomachus, Philo of Larissa and Cicero. Richard Bett in his *Introduction* lists the most important problems in interpreting ancient skepticism: What kinds of belief, if any, are open to a skeptic? Can a skeptic allow for choice and action and if so, then how? Is skepticism compatible with an ethical outlook? Is there a real difference between the Academic and Pyrrhonist varieties of skepticism? Casey Perin takes on the first one, Katja Maria Vogt—the second, Richard Bett—the third, and Gisela Striker—the last one. We also have the next five papers presenting other important aspects of ancient skepticism. Paul Woodruff writes about skeptical modes, James Allen about the relation between Pyrrhonism and medical schools, Emidio Spinelli about the critique of specialized sciences, Luciano Floridi about the modern rediscovery of ancient skepticism, and Michael Williams about its Cartesian transformation. The *Companion* is very rich in content and very up-to-date, presenting the latest hypotheses. Here I would like to discuss the problem of Pyrrho's place within the skeptical tradition.

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I disagree with the initial sentence of the first essay: “Scepticism was first formulated and endorsed by two different schools or groups, the Academics in the third century BC and the Pyrrhonist skeptics in the first century BC” (Lee, 2010, p. 13). Pyrrho of Elis is passed over in silence. It is the thesis that Pyrrho was not a declared skeptic and that the first declared skeptic was Arcesilaus in Plato’s Academy. Later in Lee’s essay, Pyrrho is interpreted as a representative of Cratylus’ view on the indeterminacy of nature (Lee, 2010, p. 24). I am not convinced that this interpretation is correct.

Lee’s view fits Bett’s (2003) metaphysical interpretation of Pyrrho as not being a skeptic at all. “Pyrrho declared reality to be inherently indeterminate...In Sextus’ own terms; Pyrrho would thus qualify as a ‘dogmatist’ rather than as a sceptic” (Bett, 2003, p. 4). In his *Introduction* to this *Companion* Bett additionally writes that Pyrrho’s influence on Arcesilaus is debatable:

It has been suggested that Pyrrho was in some way an influence on Arcesilaus, and this is possible (though neither he nor anyone else in the Academy is known to have acknowledged it). But Arcesilaus did claim to have learned from Socrates (Cicero, *Acad.* 1.45); and certainly Socrates’ argumentative practice in many of Plato’s dialogues could well have served as a model for someone in the business of constructing sets of opposing arguments, with a view to suspension of judgment. (Bett, 2010, p. 4)

Also H. Thorsrud in his paper “Arcesilaus and Carneades” suggests that Pyrrho is an inspiration for the later Pyrrhonists but not for academic skepticism. Thorsrud presupposes Arcesilaus’ tenuous connection with Pyrrho and claims that Arcesilaus initiated a skeptical phase in the Academy on the ground of an “innovative reading of Plato’s dialogues” (Thorsrud, 2010, p. 58).

Fortunately, Svavar Hrafn Svavarsson in his paper “Pyrrho and Early Pyrrhonism” defends Pyrrho’s important position in the history of skepticism. Svavarsson concedes that Cicero’s ignorance of Pyrrho and Pyrrhonism is problematic.

The ignorance of such a learned man engaged in the history and explication of scepticism, if not feigned, may indicate the obscurity and perceived inconsequentiality of Pyrrho’s views at the time, a mere curiosity, with little bearing on scepticism. Cicero’s remarks pertain to the Pyrrho who postulated indifference as an ideal state of mind, with no reference to its epistemic source. (Svavarsson, 2010, p. 38)

Pyrrho might have been just an “icon of indifference” for the later Skeptics when they defended the possibility of life without belief.

Svavarsson provides serious reasons to retain the skeptical reading of Pyrrho in the canonical testimony of Aristocles in Eusebius (Praep. evang.

14.18, DC 53, LS 1F). He opposes Bett's radically objective and metaphysical reading, according to which Pyrrho claimed that things in themselves were indeterminate (a kind of dogmatic claim alien to later Pyrrhonism). After a long list of different attempts at interpreting the canonical text of Aristocles, Svavarsson's proposal seems very convincing: Pyrrho does not claim that things are indeterminate, but he claims that we are not able to decide how things are (Svavarsson 2010, 42). He says that "things are equally indifferentiable (*adiaphora*) and unmeasurable (*astathmeta*) and undecidable (*anepikrita*)" and because of this "neither our perceptions nor opinions tell the truth or lie." This is a subjective reading of the *adiaphora*, *astathmeta*, *anepikrita* adjectives and an epistemological reading of the whole passage. It is meaningful (against Bett, 2003, p. 22) because if things are such that we cannot decide how they are, our perceptions and opinions have no established value (true or false). "On this conception, if one tells the truth, one gives a true account, an account of the nature of things" (Svavarsson, 2010, p. 45). If we cannot decide how things are, there is no chance that our perceptions and opinions are true or even definitely false. They are quite incomparable to things. Pyrrho does not speak about the nature of things (metaphysical level); he talks about the insufficiency of our cognitive capacities to capture the nature of things; he emphasises our inability to decide in the case of conflict of appearances (epistemological level). This is still a kind of dogmatic claim about our cognition (Svavarsson, 2010, p. 47), but this particular kind of dogmatism appears very often among skeptics (for instance in the new Academy). Pyrrho "preserves as fundamental the skeptical insight that one cannot decide how things are by nature" (Svavarsson, 2010, p. 44).

In the Aristocles' passage Pyrrho claims that our reaction to the undecidability of things should be living without opinions (*adoxastous*) and simply saying that each thing "no more (*ou mallon*) is than is not or both is and is not or neither is nor is not." "Aphasia as non-assertion in effect amounts to suspension of judgement ... Pyrrho neither affirms nor denies anything, just like Sextus" (Svavarsson, 2010, p. 49). This interpretation places Pyrrho within the skeptical tradition and explains why he was a hero for the later Pyrrhonists³. It also fits in with the testimony of Diogenes Laertius.

In my opinion, making a strict distinction between metaphysical and epistemological readings of Pyrrho is somewhat artificial. Bett may have overestimated Pyrrho's dogmatism at the metaphysical level; after all, every thesis is dogmatic according to Sextus. The accusation that Pyrrho is

³ Besides metaphysical and epistemological readings, there are also ethical readings (restricting *apatheia* to ethical predicates; Hankinson 1995, Decleva Caizzi 1981) and a theory attributing the epistemological content of Aristocles's passage to Timon (Brunschwig, 1994, p. 211).

a dogmatist may be a typical mistake connected with the language difficulties of every speaking skeptic. Throughout its history, ancient skepticism struggled with the charge of negative dogmatism. For instance, Arcesilaus and Carneades tried to explain how they can be skeptics and live and philosophize. Despite their explanations, Aenesidemus accused them of dogmatism and he himself was similarly challenged by Sextus. In modern reception, Sextus' view has been interpreted as a dogmatic thesis that *we have no knowledge* and all his subtle explanations were ignored. Pyrrho was probably no more a dogmatist than other skeptics.

It was courageous of Lee to start her essay with the opinion that skepticism started in the Academy. Maybe she decided to honor only strong and direct testimonies like Cicero's works and tried to ignore the later and less decisive ones like Sextus Empiricus's, the less credible ones like Diogenes Laertius's, or third-hand information given by Eusebius. Thorsrud could be right that we can find "a dialectical method" (Thorsrud, 2010, p. 59) in Plato's dialogues. "Socrates unintentionally promotes *epochē* insofar as he offers nothing to replace the views he has refuted; he leaves his interlocutors in a state of *aporia*, that is, puzzled and uncertain as to what they should now think" (Thorsrud, 2010, pp. 60-61). But we still have serious reasons to think of Pyrrho as the founder of skepticism.

Sextus Empiricus (PH 1.7; 1.234), as well as Diogenes Laertius (DL 9), Eusebius following Aristocles and Numenius (LS 1.F; LS 68.F), an Anonymous commentator on Plato's *Theaetetus* (LS 71.D), Photius (*Library* 169b.20) and others present Pyrrho as a skeptic. Timon is said to have promoted Pyrrho in Athens in Arcesilaus' times. Timon was also acquainted with Lacydes, Arcesilaus' pupil. Timon describes Arcesilaus (DL 4.42) as a vain crowd-pleaser and is annoyed by "the Academic practice of argument contra every thesis, as the basis for suspension of judgment" (LS vol. 1, p.24). However, after Arcesilaus' death he actually praises his philosophy (DL 9.114-115). This testimony confirms that Arcesilaus knew about Pyrrho's philosophy of suspending judgment and about his lifestyle without opinion.

Numenius in Eusebius writes that

Arcesilaus stayed faithful to Pyrrho, except for the name, by the denial of everything...denied the true, the false and the convincing. Though he might have been called a Pyrrhonist by reason of his Pyrrhonian features, he allowed himself to go on being called an Academic. (Prep. Evang. 14.6, LS 68F1-2)

Numenius, as a Platonist from the 2nd century AD, is hostile toward Arcesilaus, but he points to Arcesilaus' difficult situation in the Academy as something that could have prevented him from talking about his Pyrrhonian inspiration. Also Aristo in Diogenes Laertius describes Arcesilaus as "Plato in front, Pyrrho behind, Diodorus in the middle" (DL

4.32, LS 68E2). This description shows Arcesilaus to be neither an idealist like Plato, nor a serious ethical skeptic like Pyrrho, but a dialectician using skeptical arguments in the battle against the Stoics.

Arcesilaus had serious reasons to remain silent concerning the inspiration he drew from Pyrrho: he was in fact obliged to develop Plato's thought, and thus he was ashamed of having such alien inspirations. All academic skeptics must have been feeling the pressure of a possible disloyalty to Plato. They had good motivation to leave Pyrrho unacknowledged and to emphasize their own tradition. It would have been strange to admit that a poet like Timon or a country philosopher such as Pyrrho had inspired the leader of a great academy. It was already quite strange that skeptical views were accepted in a school with such great traditions. In order to gain acceptance for his philosophy, Arcesilaus had to show his precursors to be Socrates and Plato.

Differences also existed. Pyrrho's skepticism with gave "no reason to engage in philosophical argument" (LS, 446). For him skepticism was a way of life, but for Arcesilaus it was a method of arguing both sides, a weapon against the Stoics. "The Academy of Plato took a skeptical turn in direct reaction against the newly-developed and highly optimistic early Stoic epistemology" (Hankinson, 1995, p. 5). This difference explains the usefulness of the skeptical view for Arcesilaus and the dialectical interpretation of this skepticism, but it does not preclude Pyrrhonian inspiration. After disarming the Stoics, the time came also for the Academics to ask how to live without an opinion. In both cases, skepticism was leading to the suspension of all assents. Such was the idea of skepticism before Aenesidemus. Plutarch describes skeptics as "the people who suspend judgment about everything" (Plutarch, AC 1120C, LS 68H1).

We may find it problematic that Sextus writes remarkably little about Pyrrho, mentioning him several times, but with no comment on his doctrine. Sextus' work, meaningfully entitled *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, contains the sentence: "Pyrrho appears to us to have attached himself to skepticism more systematically and conspicuously than anyone before him" (PH 1.7). The phrase "appears to us" is interpreted as an expression of distance. But Sextus had some plausible excuses. Several sentences earlier he declared speaking only about "appearances" to be a fundamental principle of his skeptical discourse. He did not have Pyrrho's original texts and was probably disgusted by Timon's poetry, thinking that he quoted poorly. Timon did give an account of Pyrrho's life, but might have appeared unreliable about Pyrrho's philosophy. Aenesidemus even corrected anecdotes about Pyrrho's life (DL 9.62, LS 1.A). Sextus as a skeptic might have needed to be cautious in ascribing any doctrine to the father of skepticism. The problem was twofold. Firstly, Sextus had no beliefs about Pyrrho's view, because he had no beliefs at all. Secondly,

Pyrrho had no doctrine as a skeptic (see Theodosius in DL 9.70). In effect, when the later Pyrrhonists used Pyrrho's vocabulary such as *apatheia*, *ataraxia*, “no more,” “determining nothing,” they were not quoting Timon. And they probably did not know the Aristocles passage. This shows that while peripatetic Aristocles was able to summarize Timon's texts in one rational view, Sextus and other later Pyrrhonists were unable to do it (probably because of Pyrrho's position and their own skepticism).

Cicero is the oldest extant and direct source of ancient skepticism. He confirms that the memory of Pyrrho was alive in the first-century BC and confirms also his interest in ethical matters.

For Aristo the highest good is not to be moved to either side in these [intermediate between virtue and vice] things, which he calls ‘indifference’. Pyrrho, on the other hand, held that a wise man is not even aware of them, which is called ‘impassivity’ (*apatheia*). (Acad.2.130=DC 69A, LS2F)

Pyrrho is presented as an austere moralist, but the passage does not show him as an important figure in the discussion about suspending judgment. Cicero does not use the word “scepticus,” so he has no opportunity to call him a *skeptic*. The lack of this concept was for Cicero an obstacle to seeing skeptics outside of the academy. He could not, of course, say that Pyrrho is an Academic and he did not have the concept of scepticus. As far as we know, it was Philo of Alexandria who, in the first century AD, used the word *skeptikoi* for the first time (Bett, 2003, p. 148). It would have been fine if Cicero had written that Pyrrho advised the suspension of judgement. But Cicero wrote only about indifference and *apatheia* as the central concepts of Pyrrho's view. I think that in this he might even be close to the Aristocles passage. *Apatheia* is the reaction to problems with determining things and establishing the truth. The quotations from Timon show that Pyrrho was interested in epistemology, even if his ethics and lifestyle were more famous. These epistemological elements could not have been added by the later Pyrrhonists, because they are quotations from Timon.

Cicero's testimony remains important, however closely it might be connected with the academic tradition. Cicero, in fact, is not very well informed about Greek philosophy: “He also shows no knowledge whatever of his rough contemporary Aenesidemus” (Bett, 2003, p. 105). He does not understand Pyrrho, he is a Roman stranger who has had a brief, direct exposure to the Academy, and he has “forensic and political ambitions, necessarily of a somewhat dilettante nature” (Bett, 2003, p. 105). Cicero's testimony is the oldest important first-hand source, but he represents one specific tradition. When we move on to other traditions, we can learn about Pyrrho as a skeptic (Timon, Antigonus, Diogenes Laertius, Sextus, Numenius in Eusebius). The Peripatetic Aristocles refers to Timon's

writings and has no doubt that Pyrrho, not Plato, was the powerful advocate of skepticism.

According to Lee, early Greek philosophers were not naïve about the possibility of acquiring knowledge. Almost every later skeptical argument was already in the air then, but “no one during this period deliberately embraced the position that nothing can be known, or argued for suspension of judgement on all matters” (Lee, 2010, p. 33). For instance, in *Posterior Analytics* 1.3 Aristotle considers the threat of infinite regress and vicious circle, but he “opposes such ideas, does not think that anyone would be happy to conclude that nothing can be known; indeed, he doesn’t actually think of it as a philosophical position at all” (Lee, 2010, p. 26). Here the possibility of a skeptical conclusion is rather an opportunity to re-examine the assumptions. But such a description of the pre-skeptical period does not suit Pyrrho. Lee writes that Pyrrho just accepted the indeterminacy thesis, like Cratylus, without making a skeptical declaration (Lee, 2010, pp. 24–25). In my opinion, such an interpretation does not fit in with our knowledge of Pyrrho’s life. He was famous as a philosopher who overtly promoted non-assertion. Many anecdotes about Pyrrho show that he treated indifference very seriously. He was the first strongly declared and convinced skeptic, as far as we know. He declared himself a skeptic even more radically than Arcesilaus, who was hidden behind Plato.

The new interpretation is interesting, but it rests on tenuous ground. Cicero is the oldest source, but not an impartial one. When we follow Cicero, we get no proper answer to the question: if Pyrrho was not a skeptic at all, why did Aenesidemus choose Pyrrho as a skeptical hero? It is not enough to say that the later Pyrrhonists may have harbored negative emotions toward the Academy. The Peripatetic Aristocles seems to be the most impartial of all sources, and so his evidence should prevail. Additionally, Aristocles writes in Eusebius that Pyrrho was a distinctive representative of skepticism. “Pyrrho of Elis was also a powerful advocate of such a position [that we know nothing]” (Praep. Evang. 14.18; DC 53). Aristocles is hostile to skepticism, but he does admit that Pyrrho was a special figure in the history of skepticism. Sextus writes similarly: “Pyrrho appears to us to have attached himself to skepticism more systematically and conspicuously than anyone before him” (PH 1.7).

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