

# Ancient scepticism: A chance for happiness

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## Abstract

*In this paper, an attempt will be made to examine the concept ataraxia as it appears in the works of Pyrrho of Elis, Sextus Empiricus and other philosophers belonging to the ancient sceptical tradition. This school of thought is primarily concerned with the avoidance of disturbance (ataraxia), and they do this by suspending judgment. But the suspension of judgment is only possible given the suspension of belief. They wish to avoid disturbances which arise not only in the act of disputing judgments, but also those which arise by virtue of believing the premises involved in the dispute. The sceptic says that ataraxia comes by chance where "chance" means that ataraxia is inexplicable and naturally so. Just as the sceptics will not engage in a language of essences because they question the possibility of presenting nature in such a language, neither will they engage in the pursuit of something which cannot, in principle, be pursued - absence from trouble. For exactly how does one pursue an "absence"? Whether we agree with the ancient sceptic's way or not, there is a degree of wisdom in their recommendations that we suspend judgment on what is, in principle, not judgeable. If human happiness is such a matter, we cannot fault the sceptics for questioning philosophical attempts to arbitrate what happiness is, especially if happiness stands over and against nature.*

According to legend, the philosopher who first experiences "freedom from disturbance" or *ataraxia* is Pyrrho of Elis<sup>1</sup>. Pyrrho's disciple Timon presents us with this image:

*"Such was the man I saw, unconceited and unbroken by all the pressures that have subdued the famed and unfamed unlike... O Pyrrho, how and whence did you discover escape from servitude to the opinions and empty theorising of sophists? How did you unloose the shackles of every deception and persuasion?"*

The question raised by this and other remaining fragments is how Pyrrho is able to achieve *ataraxia*. The text which most scholars use to probe this question is found in Eusebius<sup>3</sup>. Eusebius tells us:

*"It is necessary, first of all, to inquire about our knowledge; for if by nature we are unable to know anything, it will not be necessary to look at the rest.*

*There were some people in older times who told such a story; Aristotle contradicted them. Pyrrho of Elis gained some fame by saying such things, but he himself did not leave any written work. In any case, his disciple Timon says that it is necessary, for whoever is to enjoy happiness, must look at the three following points First, how things are by their nature; secondly, in what way we must be disposed towards them, and finally, what the benefit will be for people who are so".<sup>4</sup>*

"How things are by their nature?" is arguably the most fundamental question of Greek philosophy. Implicit in this question are two assumptions. First, to ask what the world is really like. This presupposes that the world is actually like some "x". Second, to assume that the world is really like some "x" presupposes that we may come to know that "x" in due course. The sceptic does not deny that the world might actually be like some "x"; the sceptic suspends judgment on the efficacy of coming to know that "x".

For example, Pyrrho says that "things are equally indistinguishable, unmeasurable and indeterminable".<sup>5</sup> As things are "indistinguishable" we cannot say whether our judgments about them are true or false; they could be either or perhaps neither. Hence, we should "be without judgments, inclining neither this way nor that, but be steadfast saying concerning each individual thing that it no more is than is not, or that it both is and is not, or that it neither is or is not."<sup>6</sup>

By "judgments" Pyrrho means our inferences to what an "x" is from our perception of "x." We might perceive that honey is sweet, but this perception cannot validate the inference that honey is sweet. All we can say with regard to honey is that "the honey appears to me sweet now," or that "the honey appears to taste sweet to me now." What the Pyrrhonist will not affirm is that we can have knowledge about any "x," be it affirmative or "negative." The Pyrrhonist, will neither affirm "honey is sweet" nor deny that "honey is sweet." According to the Pyrrhonist we cannot know either what an "x" is or is not.

Does it follow that the statements "the honey appears to be sweet to me now" and "the honey appears to be not sweet to me now" are somehow equivalent? Since the Pyrrhonist will neither affirm nor deny what an "x" is by nature, the Pyrrhonist will not attempt to affirm which of the above statements are true. Invoking the principle of non-contradiction we say that they cannot both be true. But, the Pyrrhonist suspends judgment on the issue and thus it appears that they could be both be true, both be false, or be either or neither.

The suspension of judgment does not hold in accordance with basic philosophical principles, but in spite of them. The Pyrrhonist will not appeal to, say, the principle of the excluded middle in order to affirm that "either the

honey is sweet or it is not sweet, but it cannot be both". Since it is by invoking these principles that we determine the truth or falsity, and thereby the meaning of our statements, how are we to attribute meaning to the Pyrrhonist's statement?

The problem for the Pyrrhonist is not to determine which statement is true with respect to the relationship between the perception (sweet) and its object (honey). Rather, the problem is being able to infer from either statement what the honey is, or is not, by nature. The Pyrrhonist is willing to claim that for any "x" that this "x" appears to be "y"<sup>1</sup>, but this does not mean that the Pyrrhonist is willing to stipulate the nature of any "x" for the sake of argument or communication. To stipulate is, in effect, to defer judgement about the truth of a claim concerning "x." To speak the truth about any "x" is to state the essence of "x." Although the sceptic does not deny that any "x" might have an essence, he will neither affirm nor deny that this essence can be known. And if the essence of "x"<sup>11</sup> cannot be known, one cannot speak of what an "x" is by nature. Hence, the Pyrrhonist cannot speak truly or falsely about any "x", because *qua* Pyrrhonist he has suspended judgment on the assumption that we may come to know what "x" is. Since he has suspended judgment on whether he can say something truthful about "x," it seems that he also suspends judgment about whether he could stipulate the truth about "x."

The Pyrrhonist claim that "the honey appears to be sweet to me now" neither presupposes nor entails an ontological or existential claim about the nature of honey; he avoids such claims by substituting the noun forms of *phantasiai* (appearance) for the verb forms of *einai* (to be). In doing so, the Pyrrhonist attempts to rid himself of thinking that for every appearance there must be an "x" which appears. Since it is the possibility of knowing that x which the Pyrrhonist calls into question, he tailors his speech accordingly. It is no wonder that the sceptic who follows Pyrrho will first be rendered "speechless" -unwilling, or perhaps unable, to say anything.

Yet, this is temporary *aporia*. The final part of the fragment from Busebius reads: "Now, for the people disposed that way Timon says that the benefit will be first abstention from assertion, then absence of trouble (*ataraxian*), and Aenesidemus says pleasure."<sup>7</sup> Absence from trouble, then, follows suspension of judgement, but how?

Later sceptics point out that the sceptic wants to free himself from disturbances which are avoidable. Sextus Empiricus writes, "We do not suppose, of course, that the Sceptic is wholly untroubled, but we do say that he is troubled only by things unavoidable. For we agree that sometimes cold and thirsty and has various feelings like those."

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The sceptic, then, is not entirely immune to physical needs. Nonetheless, he is better off than the non-sceptic because the disturbances which arise from physical needs will be moderate as long as he "is free of the additional element of belief that it *matters* whether he secures food and drink."<sup>9</sup> Thus, even at the level of physical needs the sceptic suspends judgment because judgment follows from belief, and the sceptic shows not only that "all belief is unreasonable...[but that] belief itself is impossible."<sup>10</sup>

How are we to understand that "belief itself is impossible"? On the one hand, we can say that where contemporary philosophers might speak of beliefs as dispositions to act, the sceptic refers not to beliefs but to inclinations. The sceptic can and does act on a tendency or an inclination, but this inclination is not a philosophically informed belief. A philosophically informed belief contains some content about the nature of any "x." Since the sceptic will neither affirm nor deny the nature of any "x," he cannot be said to hold or to have philosophical beliefs.

On the other hand, we can say that the sceptic's suspension of judgment presupposes the suspension of beliefs related to the value of any "x." According to Sextus, the most intense disturbances concern disagreements about the nature of what is good or bad. Those who believe "x" to be good are in perpetual disagreement with those who believe that, say, "y" is good and/or that "x" is bad. But the sceptic claims:

*"that it is not possible to be happy while supposing that anything is by nature good or bad. For the person who does this is swept around accompanied by never-ending disturbance, avoiding some things and pursuing others, and drawing on himself, because of the good things, many bad things, but being pounded, because of his opinion about the bad things, by many times more bad things."<sup>11</sup>*

The sceptic is concerned to avoid disturbance, and he does this by suspending judgment. But the suspension of judgment is only possible given the suspension of belief. He wishes to avoid disturbances which arise not only in the act of disputing judgments, but also those which arise by virtue of believing the premises involved in the dispute. Thus, it is not only the breadth, but also the depth of dispute which causes disturbance, and this disturbance bears on one's personal conduct. A man who believes that "x" is by nature good will "busy himself over the acquisition of it," yet when such a person has acquired "x," he will "agonize" over the possibility that try as he might, he will lose "x".

If we can acquire an "x" which cannot be lost, would the disturbances from valuing "x" still arise? For the "x" the philosopher values differs in kind from honour, wealth, and the like. The "x" the philosopher values is an

unchanging, stable, eternal "x" the acquisition of which is said to constitute philosophical knowledge. And philosophical knowledge is not something which can be lost when once acquired.

The sceptic point is that since philosophers continue to dispute over the nature of philosophical knowledge, philosophical knowledge appears as fleeting as honour, wealth and the like. Hence, the sceptic considers the question about the value of any "x" to be similar to the question about the nature of any "x" - both questions are *anepikritos*; i.e., "it cannot be decided or it has not been decided."

Yet there is a difference between that which has not yet been decided and that which cannot be decided. My interest is with those passages in which Sextus writes that a disagreement -*diaphonia*- cannot be decided in principle. I do not think it is merely accidental that two out of the four uses of *diaphonia* in this strict sense occur in Book 1 of the *Outlines* in the chapter titled "What Is the Goal of Scepticism?"<sup>14</sup> From these passages it is clear that to suspend judgment in the face of conflicting opinions for which there is no definitive criterion is not in any way unusual, but is, in fact, quite prudent. To do anything other than suspend judgment entails the belief that the disagreement will be resolved at some time. Since Sextus writes that disputes which concern, say, assessing which *phantasiai* are true and which false cannot be resolved at any time, it seems that *epoche* is a natural, if not necessary, response to matters which are considered to be *diaphonia* in the strict sense. But if *epoche* is an appropriate response, what are we to make of *ataraxia*, which is said to follow *epoche* "by chance?"

Although we can say that something happened by chance, we cannot confuse such a statement with an explanation of the event. We may describe an event or occurrence in terms of chance, but we cannot explain an event or an occurrence in terms of chance, for chance, strictly speaking, explains nothing. What we mean when we say that "x" happened by chance is 1) that we could not have foretold that "x" would happen, and 2) even after the fact of "x" there is no way of explaining "x." In this way, chance is a term we reserve for those events and occurrences which we cannot explain either now or in the foreseeable future. A "chance" event is an event which cannot be explained in principle, just as certain *diaphonia* cannot be resolved in principle.

But if there is no way of explaining how *ataraxia* follows from *epoche*, would this mean that *ataraxia* is not specific to the purview of scepticism? If *ataraxia* truly happens "by chance," there is no reason to say that it follows sceptical *epoche* anymore than it follows Stoic meditation. According to Sextus, it appears that the Stoics are also seeking *ataraxia*, but what the

sceptic may understand is that *ataraxia* is a chance occurrence, and thus it holds to no precondition or method. There is nothing we can do, not do, intend or not intend, which will secure that which follows "by chance". Since the Stoic is assured that what he seeks follows from what he does, he is actually not seeking *ataraxia*.

Significantly, this chance happening is likened to trying to paint foam on a horse's mouth and failing, and not trying to paint foam on a horse's mouth and succeeding. This analogy has led Myles Burnyeat to conclude that, "when the sceptic does suspend judgment, *ataraxia* follows: the tranquillity he sought comes to him, *as if by chance*, once he stops actively trying to get it."<sup>16</sup> I do not think that Burnyeat is correct to add the adverbial phrase "as if" to the description "by chance". Sextus repeatedly writes that *ataraxia* follows *epoche* not as if by chance, but "by chance." Therefore, I think Sextus's infamous analogy to the story of Apelles the painter requires a bit more scrutiny.

Firstly, Sextus mentions that the sponge which Apelles threw is the sponge which "he used to wipe his paints from his brush". Apelles does not throw just any sponge, but one which is at hand. Secondly, this sponge is not a primary tool, like the brush, paints, and canvas which could be said to be necessary to the task of painting. The sponge is useful or helpful, but not necessary. The brush, paints, and canvas are directly related to the project of painting, even when not explicitly used for such a purpose, but the sponge, like a cloth or rag, is indirectly related; i.e., it can be used for other purposes, but happens to be on hand.

Further, we infer that Apelles has given up his task because he throws not the brush, but the sponge, yet the sponge is only one of a family of items assembled for his task. In a way Apelles does not abandon his project to the extent that he throws a rock or rips the canvas; he abandons the usual method of completing his task. Apelles achieves the desired effect in a way which is unexpected, unrepeatable, and inexplicable: it just happens.

How could Apelles explain this epiphenomenon? We might be tempted to say he cannot explain it and so he, like Sextus, must appeal to chance, since it is "by chance" that Apelles achieves his aim. It is also tempting to say that Apelles's desire remains the same, both prior to and after he "stops actively trying" to achieve it. But at that moment of exasperation, when Apelles throws the sponge at the canvas, does he not purposively abandon his original desire? Contrary to the idea that one must fulfill one's desire to be happy, is Sextus saying that one must actually abandon that desire and along with the desire the means for achieving its end?

As Apelles throws the sponge at the canvas, so the sceptic throws the modes into philosophical arguments. And just as the sponge is not entirely foreign to Apelles's project, deploying the modes is not entirely unlike doing philosophy. The modes are logical exercises, tools that the sceptic uses to refute whatever conclusion philosophers dare, including, perhaps, the idea that happiness consists in knowing the nature of any "x." In place of, say, Platonic or Aristotelian accounts of "happiness," the sceptic speaks of *ataraxia*. Since this is not what the skeptic originally set out to do, he never aims for *ataraxia*, but *ataraxia* is that which comes.

This does not mean that *ataraxia* is a creature of fortune or fate; i.e., that *ataraxia* is a gift from the gods. *Ataraxia*, rather, is a creature of chance -a creature of nature. For *ataraxia* follows from the suspension of judgment concerning issues which are, in principle, not judgeable. As Martha Nussbaum observes, this is natural and not mysterious:

*"...the orientation to ataraxia is not a belief or a value commitment. It has the status of a natural inclination. Naturally, without belief or teaching, we move to free ourselves from burdens and disturbances not intensely or with any committed attachment, but because that's just the way we go."*

Once the sceptic calls into question the possibility that we can come to know "how things are by nature", he can only conceive of nature and of what is natural as that which is inexplicable. The sceptic says that *ataraxia* comes by chance where "chance" means that *ataraxia* is inexplicable and naturally so. Just as the sceptic will not engage in a language of essences because he questions the possibility of presenting nature in such a language, neither will the sceptic engage in the pursuit of something which cannot, in principle, be pursued - absence from trouble. For exactly how does one pursue an "absence"?

Whether we agree with the ancient sceptic's way or not, there is a degree of wisdom in his recommendation that we suspend judgment on what is, in principle, not judgeable. If human happiness is such a matter, we cannot fault the sceptic for questioning philosophical attempts to arbitrate what happiness is, especially if happiness stands over and against nature.

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## Endnotes

1. Possible influences on Pyrrho include Indian mysticism and the Eleatics. Indeed Timon weaves for Pyrrho a philosophical pedigree which includes Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Democritus, for their thought would have been available to Pyrrho through his own teacher Anaxarchus. Nonetheless, scepticism is said to begin with Pyrrho (cf: commentary in Long(2)).
2. The first part of this quotation is taken from Aristocles as recorded by Eusebius. The second part is from Diogenes Laeritus. Both are included in Long(2), p. 18.
3. Apparently, chapters 17-21 of Eusebius's work are culled from the Peripatetic philosopher Aristocles, specifically from Aristocles's *On Philosophy*, Book VIII (first century CE). Eusebius "claims to quote Aristocles *ipsisima verba*" so scholars are confident that Eusebius has faithfully transcribed information found in Aristocles (cf: Brunsehwig, pp. 190-91). There could, however, be a problem with Aristocles<sup>1</sup> account since he was vehemently opposed to scepticism. And to complicate matters, Aristocles<sup>1</sup> account is purported to come not from Pyrrho, but from Timon.
4. Quoted from *Praeparatio evangelica*, Bk. XIV, ch. 18, in Brunschwig, p. 191.

6. Qtd. in Long(I), p.80. Scholars have noted that there is a subtle difference between these three adjectives (cf: Long, p.80, fnt 3, or Barnes, p.17). In context, "indistinguishable" means not distinguished in the sense of not distinguishable now. But both "unmeasureable" and "indeterminable" contain, in the original Greek, *-tos* suffixes.

7. Qtd. in Long(I), p.81. The addition of this suffix could mean that like "indistinguishable" what is declared to be "unmeasureable" is that which is currently unmeasured, or that unlike "indistinguishable" that which is said to be "unmeasured" is that which is incapable of being measured. Where most scholars agree that Pyrrho himself would not have made what seems to be a subtle epistemological distinction, Timon does draw these distinctions. Jacques Brunschwig, for example (p.21ff), argues that Timon is concerned to enlarge the "range of opinions which we will be urged...to live without." Hence, Timon expands upon the teachings of Pyrrho and one can only wonder why he felt encouraged or perhaps why he felt it necessary, to do so. That is, what is it about Pyrrho's original teaching which Timon felt was, in itself, insufficient?

7. Qtd. in Brunschwig, p.192.

8. OP, I, 29.

9. Burnyeat, p.126.

10. p. 125

11. *AdvM.V, 14 5.*

12. p. 146.

13. Barnes, p.17.

14. The passages read as follows: "For when the Sceptic set out to philosophize with the aim of assessing his *phantasiai*-that is, of determining which are true and which are false so as to achieve *ataraxia*- he landed in a controversy between positions of equal strength, and, being unable to resolve it, suspended judgement. But while he was suspending judgment there followed by chance the sought-after *ataraxia* as regards belief" (OP, I, 26-27), and, "So, too, the Sceptics were hoping to achieve *ataraxia* by resolving the anomaly of phenomena and noumena, and, being unable to do this, they suspended judgment. But then, by chance as it were, when they were suspending judgment the *ataraxia* followed, as a shadow follows the body (OP, 1,29).

15. *Metaphysics*, 1065a34.

1 6. Emphasis mine, pp.1 20-21. 17.

p. 305.