

Indeterminacy before Pyrrho: Indeterminacy in Pyrrho?

I take the term “indeterminacy” to capture the idea that there is no one definite way things really are. Whatever set of specific characteristics one might wish to attribute to things, it is not in fact the case that these things have these characteristics. The point is ontological, not epistemological; it is about the objective nature of things, not about our ability to grasp how they are (which the term “indeterminacy” might also be understood to signify, hence the need to stress this). Another way to put the point is that these things do not in fact have any objective nature – or at least, any objective nature that includes identifiable specific features. To speak of things as indeterminate is therefore radically opposed to any view that posits essences for things; in fact, it may well be opposed to the idea that there are really distinct, identifiable *things* at all. It is no accident that one of the most vehement opponents of indeterminacy is Aristotle.

Views incorporating some element of indeterminacy come on the scene pretty early in Greek philosophy. In the past I have argued that Pyrrho of Elis, the supposed originator of Greek skepticism, was a major proponent of the view that reality is indeterminate, and was influenced by earlier thinkers who were drawn to some version of this idea.¹ If so, it of course follows that the label “skeptic” does not really apply to him, since skepticism, as the Pyrrhonian Sextus Empiricus later explains it, is precisely the absence of any decided views about reality – even the view that it is indeterminate. I am no longer so sure about Pyrrho as I was a quarter-century ago. In fact, I might even say that what Pyrrho’s views were is itself indeterminate in the epistemic sense – we’re just not in a position to determine this – and possibly even indeterminate in a meta-level, ontological sense – he maybe didn’t even have any definite, worked out view (such as “reality is indeterminate” would be) at all.

¹ Bett 2000.

This is not to deny that indeterminacy is an interesting theme appearing in a number of places in earlier Greek philosophy. In what follows I shall review some of the relevant texts, before explaining why I now find it an insoluble riddle whether or not Pyrrho picked up that theme.

I

One way to posit an indeterminate reality is to deny the Law of Non-Contradiction, and an important source of evidence for such views – written, of course, by someone implacably opposed to them – is Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* Gamma. As Aristotle argues, if one holds that something can be both F and not-F, everything whatever could be true of it, so that, as he puts it, “the same thing will be a trireme, a wall, and a human” (1007b20-21). But, as he adds, this is equivalent to saying that nothing is really of *any* particular character, which he compares with Anaxagoras’ description of the primeval condition in which “all things are together”; people who go this route, he says, “seem to be speaking of the indeterminate [*to aoriston*]” (1007b25-27). Aristotle is insistent from the start that no one can actually believe this; as he says in introducing the topic, “There are some who say that it is possible for the same thing to be and not to be, *and that it is possible to suppose so*” (1005b35-1006a2). The second part of this is just as important to reject as the first: there simply is no coherent way to make this claim, and someone who persists in trying to do so will be no different from a vegetable (1008b10-12).

Aristotle sometimes seems to speak as if almost all the thinkers before him were guilty of trying to deny the LNC (e.g., 1009b15-17). Elsewhere, although he implies that denial of the LNC was relatively widespread, he has two particular figures or groups in mind: Protagoras and certain followers of Heraclitus. He is non-committal about Heraclitus himself. But he describes as “the most extreme” of the kind of view he is discussing “that of those who assert that they ‘Heraclitize’”, especially Cratylus, who went one better than Heraclitus on rivers, saying that one could not step

into the same river even once (not twice, as Heraclitus is supposed to have said), but, as a result – since the phenomenon of constant change means that there are no stable things to refer to – deciding that it is best to say nothing at all, only wagging his finger (1010a10-15). As for Protagoras, Aristotle interprets him as claiming that everything that appears so to someone is so, so that everything anyone thinks is true; the fact of conflict among perspectives and opinions then entails the denial of the LNC (1009a6-15). He does not actually mention Protagoras' statement "A human being is measure of all things", but this is clearly where he sees Protagoras as committed to these ideas.

On both Protagoras and Heraclitus, Aristotle is following Plato in the *Theaetetus*. Theaetetus' first proposed answer to the question "What is knowledge?" is "Knowledge is perception" (151e2-3), which Socrates immediately connects with Protagoras' "measure" statement (152a1-4). Like Aristotle, Socrates interprets this as claiming that things are however they appear to any given person. He goes on to connect this, in turn, with the idea that everything is constantly changing, so that nothing ever *is* of any particular character, but things are always *becoming* one way or another. And Heraclitus is one of the first (again among several) that he associates with this position (152b-e). The examination of Protagoras' view is long and complicated, but Heracliteans – again, of a very extreme kind, who are not said to include Heraclitus himself – make a further appearance near the end of this part of the dialogue (179d-183b). As in Aristotle, these Heracliteans hold that everything is in constant change, and it is emphasized that this is constant change in every respect. As a result, they are reduced to silence – or almost; the only thing they can say is "not even this way" (*oud'houtôs*), "spoken indefinitely" (183b4-5), which seems to be a way of denying that anything has any one definite character but *without* thereby attributing to it some opposite (also definite) character. Indeed, to return to

something hinted at in the introduction, we do not seem to be able to speak of *things* – or, for that matter, of characters that they might assume – at all. This is indeterminacy at its most unmitigated.

Plato, like Aristotle, clearly takes this view to be impossible to hold. But equally clearly, they both take it to have been a view that some people took seriously and took to capture how things are. Whether it was fair to associate Protagoras with this view is another question. We only have a single relevant sentence in Protagoras' own words, quoted by Plato and by others (Sextus, *M* 7.60, DL 9.51): "A human being is measure of all things, of the things that are, that [or "how"] they are, and of the things that are not, that [or "how"] they are not". For all we know, this may simply have been a way of asserting that the human perspective is all we have, which could be understood as urging us to focus on the world of human experience, including the social world, and warning us against aspiring to some supra-human perspective, as Parmenides especially might be accused of doing – as could Plato himself, though Protagoras did not live long enough to see this.² Nonetheless, I think we can see how, given Plato's own preoccupations, he might have understood the "measure" statement, meant as I have described, to commit Protagoras to the position he saddles him with in the *Theaetetus* (leading Aristotle to continue the same distorted reading). For Plato is very clear that there is an unchanging reality, the Forms, beyond the realm of mere appearances, and that things in the tawdry world of ordinary experience are to be assessed by how they relate to this unchanging reality. Someone who insisted that there is no vantage point aside from the human one might well seem to someone like Plato to be throwing away any chance of understanding reality, and thereby any chance of judging among the conflicting ways things appear; if so, reality, in the only sense we can talk about it – a drastically impoverished sense – will seem to amount to nothing more than the

² This reading is inspired by ongoing work on Protagoras by Rachel Barney.

individual perspective of each person. Those of us with less lofty ambitions need not go along with this dismissive reaction.

But if it was a mistake for Plato and Aristotle to tar Protagoras with the brush of indeterminacy, their portrayal of the Heracliteans (unnamed except for Cratylus) as committed to a view of reality as indeterminate is more credible. Though we do not have any of their own words, Plato and Aristotle give enough detail that one can see how a development and extension of Heraclitus' ideas could have led to some such view. Can we find any thinkers whose writings have survived and who themselves propose indeterminacy views? In a limited sense, I think we can, perhaps surprisingly, in the very thinkers in opposition to whom, if my suggestion was right, Protagoras directed (or would have directed, if he had lived longer) his "measure" statement: Parmenides and Plato. Indeterminacy is not, of course, their *full* view of things. Both are committed to notions of an unchanging reality beyond the changing world of ordinary experience: in Parmenides' case, What Is (*to eon*), and in Plato's, the Forms. But when it comes to the world of ordinary experience itself, "indeterminate" might well be a good way of describing their view of it.

For Parmenides, there is a correct route of discovery to pursue, the route of What Is, which leads to truth, and there is an incorrect one, the route of What Is Not, which is not feasible (LM 19 D6). Either this latter route, or a third route that is also to be shunned – the interpretation, and the supplementing of the text, which is missing two syllables at the end of a hexameter line, are controversial – is said to be the one that "mortals knowing nothing" pursue (LM 19 D7). They are accused of supposing "that being and not being are the same", as well as not the same, and this error of supposing "that things that are not are" (LM 19 D8.1) is said to be due to their reliance on the senses rather than reason. Mortals' error is later said to consist in supposing that everything "is born and destroyed, is and is not, and changes place and alters bright color" (LM 19 D8.45-46). By contrast, What Is, as a true exercise of reason will discern, is immune to change of any kind. The

conflation of being and not being sounds like a version of the denial of the LNC that Aristotle discusses in *Metaphysics* Gamma. But Parmenides associates this with an acceptance of the reality of everyday change. It appears that, for Parmenides, for something truly to *be* a certain way, it cannot in any respect or at any time *not* be that way; the way things really are must be fixed and permanent. If so, the regular world around us, which most people think is all there is, does indeed come across as indeterminate – there is no one definite way it is, in this strong sense of “is” – and the project of trying to understand it, the result of which is itself labeled “mortal opinions”, is described as “deceptive” (LM 19 D8.57) and as lacking in any “true trust” (LM 19 D4.30).

A similar, but more clearly articulated, picture emerges in some parts of Plato; the best example is perhaps the end of *Republic* book V (475b-480a), where the philosopher ruler is introduced and a distinction is made between knowledge and opinion, with knowledge the province of the philosopher and opinion held by people called “lovers of sights” (*philothēamones*) and “lovers of sounds” (*philêkooi*) (475d2-3). Knowledge is said to apply to “what is”, ignorance to “what is not”, and opinion to something between these two. As for what this “between” domain is, it turns out to be the everyday changeable world: a world of things that can appear sometimes, or in some respects, beautiful, or just, or pious, or large, but at other times, or in other respects, the opposites. This is summed up in quite general terms with the question “/s each of the many things any more than it *isn't* what one says it is?”, with the answer no; these things cannot be thought of as “fixedly” (*pagiôs*) either being or not being of any given character, or even both or neither of these (479a5-c5). By contrast, the Forms, of which there is just one for Beauty, Justice, Piety, etc., are unequivocally and permanently whatever they are. Again, change, and indeed plurality, are barriers to anything truly *being* a certain way, with the same very high standard for true being as in Parmenides; the everyday world perceived by the senses does not measure up to this standard. Instead, since everything is no more one way than the opposite, there is no one definite way it is; it is

indeterminate. The phrase “no more”, *ou mallon*, is not absolutely explicit in the text, but it is clearly implied in the question and its negative answer. As we shall see, it can be an important marker of indeterminacy, although it can have other uses as well.

In the period before Pyrrho, then, we have an indeterminacy view that both Plato and Aristotle associate with some extreme Heracliteans, and that they both argue is inconsistent with any form of speech or thought (except, in Plato’s case, the minimal utterance “not even this way”). We also find in both Plato and Parmenides a view of the ordinary world perceived by the senses as indeterminate, although in both cases this depends on a conception of what is required for something to have a determinate character that may well strike us as excessively stringent. Now, it is interesting that the extreme Heraclitean view that Socrates refutes in the *Theaetetus* has more than a little in common with the view of the ordinary world that he advances at the end of *Republic* V, with the phrase “no more” again used to express indeterminacy (182e3, 4, 10). There are various ways to try to explain this, and I cannot pursue this complicated question here.³ Still, it certainly does look as if Plato is pointing in the *Theaetetus* to an indeterminacy view that was really held, and that he sees as subject to devastating criticism, while also having Socrates in the *Republic* advance a view of the ordinary world as indeterminate that has much in common with it.

II

Whatever we may think of Plato’s intellectual machinations, there is a cluster of indeterminacy views expressed or at least discussed in the fifth and fourth centuries, and one might well take this to be a relevant precursor to the thought of Pyrrho. In earlier work I appealed, to some extent, to all

³ On this, the tentative reflections in Bett 2000, chapter 3, Appendix B (with references to several interpretations) still seem to me on the right lines.

these views as influences or indirect inspiration for his thought. I still would not rule this out, but as noted at the outset, I am no longer so convinced of it.

Near the beginning of his Life of Pyrrho, Diogenes Laertius describes Pyrrho's outlook like this: Pyrrho "said that nothing is either fine or foul, either just or unjust, and similarly in all cases, that nothing is so in reality, but that humans do everything by convention and habit; for each thing is no more this than that" (9.61). The claim that "nothing is so in reality" (*mêden einai têi alêtheiai*) and, perhaps even more so, the claim that "each thing is no more [*ou mallon*] this than that" certainly sound like expressions of a quite general indeterminacy, similar to the kind we saw in various places in the previous section; Pyrrho seems to be denying that anything has any definite characteristics. But there are two other points about this passage that seem to challenge this reading of his view. First, the examples fine (*kalon*), foul (*aischron*), just and unjust, and the claim that "humans do everything by convention [*nomôi*] and habit", suggest that Pyrrho's real interest was specifically in values rather than in the nature of things in general. The term *nomos*, which can mean "convention" but also "law", refers most broadly to the norms of society, written or unwritten. And this fits with Diogenes' selection of evaluative terms as the only examples. It also fits with the many anecdotes about Pyrrho's behavior that we find in Diogenes and other authors, which show Pyrrho as having very unusual practical or evaluative priorities. (These do not, of course, illustrate him doing everything "by convention and habit"; he comes across as spectacularly eccentric. But "people" may mean "people in general" and allow for exceptions such as himself.) All this suggests a picture of Pyrrho as animated not by a general philosophical preoccupation with the nature of things, but by a more limited interest in questions of value. If so, the indeterminacy expressed in the Diogenes passage, if that is what it is, would also be much more limited than the kinds we find discussed in Aristotle and Plato.

The second reason for questioning whether Pyrrho was a proponent of indeterminacy (either general or limited to values) is that, just before the passage I quoted in the previous paragraph, Diogenes says (on the authority of someone called Ascanius of Abdera, of whom we know nothing) that Pyrrho introduced the form of philosophy consisting in “absence of grasp and suspension of judgment” (*akatalêpsias kai epochês*, 9.61). Suspending judgment about things, or denying that they are grasped, is not the same as declaring their indeterminacy; and while the later Pyrrhonist Sextus Empiricus would not have accepted the term *akatalêpsia* – on the contrary, he attributes this to the Academics, whom he regards as negative dogmatists, not skeptics (*PH* 1.1-3) – this clearly looks much more like the Pyrrhonism of Sextus, where suspension of judgment is central, than do the ideas in the passage we considered in the previous paragraph.

“Absence of grasp and suspension of judgment” does, however, sound much more general than the value-centered position that some of what Diogenes says seems to suggest; and the moral Diogenes draws from the outlook he attributes to Pyrrho (9.62) – that Pyrrho put no trust in the senses and had to be rescued by his friends from falling off cliffs, being run over by wagons, etc. – points in the same direction. This is no help in settling whether Pyrrho suspended judgment or advanced a view of reality as indeterminate; a drastic mistrust of the senses could be conceived as a reaction to either of these. But it does at any rate suggest a global view of some kind, not a view restricted to evaluative questions. There is no reason to believe this story; and in fact Diogenes continues with the contrary statement of Aenesidemus, that Pyrrho acted in a normal, sensible fashion (9.62). The following remark, that he lived to be nearly ninety, seems to be included as additional support for this. The idea that Pyrrho was a lunatic no doubt started as a critique, much like some of Aristotle’s critiques of those who claimed to deny the LNC (see especially *Met.* 1008b12-20) – the point being that anyone who actually accepted this *would*, in consistency, be required to act in this lunatic fashion – and was at some point misunderstood as biography. Still, the

fact that this story could seem relevant suggests that Diogenes or his source understood Pyrrho's thought as quite general in character.

Diogenes' opening paragraphs, then, raise at least two questions: first, did Pyrrho hold an indeterminacy view, or did he suspend judgment in something like, if not exactly like, the manner of Sextus Empiricus? And second, if he did hold an indeterminacy view, was this quite general in character, like the views we saw in the previous section, or was it much more restricted, applying only to values? There is only one text that seems to have any chance of helping us to answer these questions: a passage from the Peripatetic Aristocles of Messene, which speaks of Pyrrho and his disciple Timon of Phlius and lays out a set of general philosophical attitudes. It has been suggested that we should not rely as heavily on this passage as scholars generally do,⁴ but there is really no alternative if we are looking for real philosophical content; aside from the confusing remarks of Diogenes, the evidence on Pyrrho consists largely of anecdotes concerning his behavior, and certainly no other passage makes any pretense of systematic exposition. Unfortunately, even the Aristocles passage does not give us much, and in particular, it does not give us enough, I think, to settle the questions raised by Diogenes' remarks.

III

Aristocles appears to have lived in the late first century BCE. He wrote a work called *On Philosophy* (*Peri Philosophias*), several chapters of which are quoted verbatim by the Christian author Eusebius (late 3rd to early 4th centuries) in his work *Preparation for the Gospel*.⁵ One of these is about Pyrrhonism, which was revived relatively recently by Aenesidemus ("yesterday and the day before", 14.18.29), and some of this chapter discusses Aenesidemus. But much of it focuses specifically on

⁴ See Green 2017, who nonetheless has a number of illuminating things to say about the passage.

⁵ Chiesara 2001 collects the full series of chapters with translation and commentary.

Pyrrho and Timon, and it begins, after a few opening remarks that appear to be an introduction to this whole series of chapters, with the general description of their philosophical attitudes that I have referred to (14.18.2-4). Aristocles first says that Pyrrho was one of those who held that “we are of a nature to know nothing” (14.18.1) and that he left nothing in writing. He then says that Timon lays out three questions that anyone who wants to be happy must answer: first, what are things like by nature; second, what should our disposition be towards them; and third, what will be the result for those who have this disposition. Aristocles does not say what work of Timon he is drawing on for this information. But he refers to two works of Timon later in the chapter (14.18.14, 14.18.28), and he refers to Timon three times in the passage itself. Several pieces of vocabulary are distinct from Aristocles’ usual word-choices and also from the terminology of the Pyrrhonist tradition initiated by Aenesidemus, which suggests that these are Timon’s own words, copied by Aristocles.⁶ All this tends to indicate that he is reading Timon, or at least someone’s detailed summary of Timon, quite carefully.⁷ It is also worth noting that in some cases we have original texts from the philosophers Aristocles discusses, which allows us to check the accuracy of his information; on this score he seems to do quite well.⁸ So although this passage gives us fourth-hand information about Pyrrho – it is Eusebius quoting Aristocles summarizing Timon, who refers to Pyrrho – this is not as bad as it sounds; there is no reason to doubt Eusebius’ claim to be quoting verbatim (for this chapter, see 14.17.10), and there is good reason to think Aristocles is giving us a reliable summary of what Timon said. The step from Timon to Pyrrho, however, is more problematic, as we shall see in the next section.

⁶ See Bett 2000, 15; Chiesara 2001, 89.

⁷ Chiesara 2001, 87-89 opts for the latter.

⁸ On this, see Bett 1994, section VI.

This problem does not apply to the answer to the first of the three questions, what things are like by nature; the answer is given as Pyrrho's own – Aristocles reports the answer that “he [Timon] says that he [Pyrrho]” offered. What Pyrrho is said to have “declared” (*apophainein*) is “that things [*ta pragmata*] are equally *adiaphora* and *astathmêta* and *anepikrita*” (14.18.3). If Pyrrho held that reality is indeterminate, here would be where he said it. But did he? The first epithet, *adiaphora*, can be translated “indifferent”, but this does not settle the matter. To say that things are indifferent might mean that they are, in their own objective nature, lacking in differentiating features, which would suggest an indeterminacy view. But it might also be saying something about our relation to them: that we lack the ability to differentiate their features. To use the terminology that has become standard in discussions of Pyrrho, the point can be read either metaphysically or epistemologically; the first would seem to bring in indeterminacy while the second would not. The other two epithets are equally indecisive. These sound on the surface epistemic; positive counterparts of both exist (*stathmêtos* and *epikritos*), meaning “measurable” and “determinable”,⁹ so natural translations would be “not to be measured” and “not to be determined”. I once translated *anepikritos* by “indeterminate”, but this failed to capture the force of the suffix *-ta*, which conveys (with the negating prefix *a-*) something not achieved or not *to be* achieved.¹⁰ However, while these words do speak of a failure or an inability of ours, it does not follow that a metaphysical understanding of the point is not possible. For Pyrrho may have meant to indicate that this failure or inability is due to something intrinsic to the things themselves that makes them inaccessible to us; that things are “not to be measured and not to be determined” could be a point about the world – that things in themselves lack any definite characteristics, which is *why* we cannot “measure” or “determine” them – not simply a point about us. Quite apart, then, from what he may have meant by “things” (a

⁹ Sextus several times employs the contrast between *epikritos* and *anepikritos* to refer to disputes that are either decidable or undecidable (*PH* 1.170, 2.19, 32).

¹⁰ For criticism of my earlier translation, see Castagnoli 2002, 447.

question to which we shall return in the next section), Pyrrho's answer to the first question leaves us in the same uncertainty (or one of them) as did the Diogenes passage: did he advocate a view of reality as indeterminate, or did he assert we are not in a position to grasp the nature of things (which could be a perfectly good answer to the first question)?

We might hope that the reasoning in the rest of the passage would allow us to resolve this uncertainty. The next thing the text says is that "for this reason, neither our sensations nor our opinions tell the truth or lie". At least, this is what all the manuscripts of Eusebius say. But some scholars have argued that "for this reason" (*dia touto*) should be changed to "on account of the fact that" (*dia to*). It has been urged that the change is necessary on linguistic grounds, but the reasons given for this are not compelling.¹¹ If one does change the text, however, it reverses the direction of the inference; the point about sensations and opinions becomes the ground for the statement about the nature of things, not an inference from it. And if we understand "neither our sensations nor our opinions tell the truth or lie" to be making a point about their *habitual* status as truth-tellers or liars, which Aristocles' language in other chapters seems to support, we get the following train of thought; *since* our sensations and opinions are not reliable, the nature of things is not accessible to us. Or rather, we get this train of thought if we read the answer to the first question in the epistemic sense. But if this point about sensations and opinions is the basis for it, the epistemic reading is overwhelmingly the more plausible one.¹² However, if one keeps the text that consistently appears in the manuscripts, so that the point about sensations and opinions follows from the point about the nature of things rather than *vice versa*, one can still read the reasoning epistemically. The point may be that, in order for our sensations and opinions to tell the truth or lie, they would have to

¹¹ For details, see Bett 2000, 25-26.

¹² The emendation was originally proposed by the 19th century German scholar Eduard Zeller. More recent proponents are Stopper 1983, n.53; Brennan 1998, especially 432-3; Perin 2018, 27. Aristocles' usage of "tell the truth/lie" to mean "habitually tell the truth/lie" is argued for by Brennan 1998, 426-432.

convey a certain impression of things and also represent this (truly or falsely) as how things really are. But since (on an epistemic reading of the answer to the first question) we cannot determine how things really are, they cannot do this; they can *only* give us impressions of things, not any guide to their real nature, and hence they do not qualify as either truth-tellers or liars.¹³

The epistemic reading is therefore still on the table, whether or not one decides to change the text. But so is the metaphysical reading, with no textual change. If the answer to the first question was that things are in their real nature indeterminate, our sensations and opinions, which show things as having definite characteristics, are not true. Why are they also not false? The answer may be that they do capture aspects of the indeterminate reality, even if they do not represent it in a way that would merit the label “true”. If reality was indeterminate because constantly changing, as held by some of the proponents of indeterminacy we saw in section I, our sensations and opinions might accurately pick up some temporary and contingent characteristic something was manifesting on a given occasion. They would not then deserve to be called false. But since they wrongly represent this characteristic as belonging to the thing in its real nature, they cannot be called true either.¹⁴

The passage now addresses the second question, what our disposition towards things should be. The next few words are clear enough: “For this reason, then, one should not trust them, but should be unopinionated, free of inclinations, and unwavering”. Whatever we think about the alternatives just considered, not trusting our sensations and opinions – that is, as a guide to the real nature of things – is a natural attitude to take, and the sequence of three epithets is presumably

¹³ So Green 2017.

¹⁴ Note that the claim that reality is indeterminate need not be considered an opinion, which would invite charges of self-refutation. Here Parmenides and Plato may be relevant. For them (as for the Stoics and the later Pyrrhonists), “opinion” (*doxa*) is an inherently untrustworthy state, quite distinct from knowledge. If Pyrrho or Timon understood “opinion” in this way, the answer to the first question need not count as a mere opinion; it could be something far superior.

reinforcing this. We are then given a directive concerning what we should say, which is much more complicated. The words are “saying about every single thing that it no more is than is not or both is and is not or neither is nor is not”.

I take it that, as in many of the views we looked at in section I and as is common in Greek philosophy, “is” and “is not” are short for “is F” and “is not F”, for some predicate F. We are then being told to say that each thing “no more is than is not” (or both or neither) of some particular character. This leaves open the question what is conveyed by the crucial phrase “no more” (*ou mallon*), which, as we saw in section I, can be used to express indeterminacy. It also leaves open how this sequence of words is to be divided; there seem to be two choices, a three-part or a four-part reading, and scholars have gone different ways on this. The directive is either to say that each thing

- i) no more is [of some character] than it is not, or [that it]
- ii) both is and is not, or [that it]
- iii) neither is nor is not;

or to say that each thing no more

- i) is [of some character] than
- ii) is not or
- iii) both is and is not or
- iv) neither is nor is not.

On one reading, there are three alternative forms of words, which are presumably at least compatible and perhaps are thought to be equivalent. On the other reading there is just one form of words, offering four possibilities each of which obtains “no more” than any of the others. I think it is fair to say that either reading is possible on either the metaphysical or the epistemic interpretation of the passage, although in each case one of them seems easier than the other. I shall now go through the options.

Let's start with the metaphysical interpretation. Here we understand the answer to the first question to be that things are in their real nature indeterminate. The phrase "no more" can then be read as indicating this indeterminacy. To say that each thing "no more is than is not" is to say that it possesses any given characteristic to no greater extent than it does not possess it. If this was applied to a limited range of predicates, it would leave open a picture of reality such as Democritus', where the only things that there are "in truth" (*eteêi*) are atoms and void, and qualities such as sweet and bitter, or hot and cold, are no part of how things really are; in this case "no more" would indicate "neither" – a point emphasized by Sextus Empiricus in distinguishing his usage of "no more" (to which we will shortly return) from Democritus' (*PH* 1.213-214). However, if "no more is than is not" is applied quite unrestrictedly, we get a picture in which nothing is of *any* particular character rather than its opposite, and this does give us a form of indeterminacy.

Now, how are we to understand the additional elements in what we are supposed to say, "both" and "neither"? If we read these words in the three-part fashion, that each thing "both is and is not" and "neither is nor is not" are additional, equally legitimate things we can say. Again, if we think of the indeterminacy view as prompted by the phenomenon of change, it is not too hard to make sense of this. To say that each thing "both is and is not" is to say that, for any given characteristic, the thing manifests this characteristic on some occasions or in some respects, but manifests the opposite characteristic on other occasions or in other respects – just as Socrates says of the perceptible world in addressing the "lover of sights and sounds" in *Republic V*. At the same time, we would not want to say that either of these characteristics belongs to the thing in its real nature, and so there is also a sense in which it "neither is nor is not" of that character – that is, of *any* character.

This three-part reading of the phrase seems to me the more natural one, if we understand the passage along metaphysical lines. On the four-part reading, we would be saying that, for any

given thing, every one of the four alternatives “is”, “is not”, “both”, and “neither” obtains to no greater extent than any of the others. We could perhaps make sense of this by interpreting it as saying that all four alternatives are in a sense correct (and “no more” can be used to signal that all the alternatives are *true*; they are all on a par, of which “all true” is one possible instance). Again, in a constantly changing world, a thing will sometimes manifest one characteristic (“is”), sometimes the opposite characteristic (“is not”); given this, as noted just now, there is a sense in which “both” applies, but also, as regards the true nature of the thing, a sense in which it is “neither”. But the changes of focus involved as one progresses through the phrase, if one understands it this way, seem much more awkward in a single, four-part utterance than in three separate utterances presented as alternatives.

If we read the whole passage epistemically, then the words we are supposed to say must be expressing our inability to discern how things really are. How are they to do this? One point that I think is clear is that “no more” will have to be read in the same way as Sextus Empiricus understands it, as a way of expressing suspension of judgment (*PH* 1.188-191); to say that each thing “no more is than is not” will then be saying that we are not in a position to tell whether it has some particular character or does not have it. And in this case, I think the four-part reading of what we are supposed to say works better than the three-part interpretation. On the four-part reading, we are to suspend judgment about all four of the options: for all we know, the thing might, for any given predicate, be F, not-F, both F and not-F, or neither F nor not-F. If we read it in the three-part fashion, the first alternative would be suspending judgment about whether the thing is F or not-F, and the other two alternatives, “both” and “neither” would then have to be understood as offering further possibilities: maybe it is both F and not-F, or maybe it is neither. This time it is the three-part reading that seems to demand more awkward changes of focus, as the four-part reading did on the metaphysical interpretation of the passage.

In any case, it seems clear that the words we are told to say can be understood consistently with either a metaphysical or an epistemic interpretation of the passage. The passage ends with the answer to the third question, what will be the result for those who have the recommended disposition (14.18.4). There are numerous issues of interest here, but none of them bear on our central question: whether Pyrrho or Timon advocated an indeterminacy view. On that question, for all we have seen so far, the answer can only be “maybe, maybe not”.

IV

But there is yet another level of uncertainty, at which I have so far only hinted. We saw that the answer to the first question is explicitly given as Pyrrho’s. But this is the *only* place in the passage where Pyrrho is explicitly invoked in answering the questions. The initial presentation of the questions is given as Timon’s, as is the answer to the third question; and the rest of the passage is simply presented as indirect speech, dependent on *phêsin*, “he [i.e., Timon] says”. Thus, for all Aristocles tells us, except for the answer to the first question, the entire reasoning of the passage may be due to Timon and not Pyrrho. It is true that Aristocles introduces Pyrrho as someone who held that “we are of a nature to know nothing”, and one may infer from this that he takes Timon to be explaining Pyrrho’s ideas. But this is not obvious. Aristocles could have come to this view of Pyrrho simply from his answer to the first question, coupled with the fact that Aenesidemus, whose book *Outlines* he seems to have access to (14.18.11), adopted Pyrrho as a figurehead. What he reports from Timon may be, in his opinion, the next best thing to direct access to Pyrrho’s thought, and no doubt influenced by Pyrrho, but still giving us Timon’s own thought, which is not necessarily identical with Pyrrho’s. Or even if Aristocles thinks, for whatever reason, that what Timon says is a reliable guide to what Pyrrho thought, it is not clear that we should think the same; nothing in the

argument of the passage, except for the answer to the first question, can be securely linked to Pyrrho himself.¹⁵

Now, if we regard Pyrrho's contribution as limited to the answer to the first question, this reopens the question whether Pyrrho's thought was centered around values, rather than being global in character like later Pyrrhonism. Diogenes' occasional suggestions of the latter alternative, despite his general portrait of Pyrrho as occupied with evaluative or practical concerns, could be influenced by the model of later Pyrrhonism, which much of his *Life of Pyrrho* in fact reflects. The "things" (*pragmata*) that Pyrrho declares to be "indifferent, not to be measured and not to be determined" may themselves be understood as our practical concerns. The word *pragmata* (from which our "practical" is of course derived) is a noun from the verb *prassô*, "do" or "act", and often has the sense of "business" – literally, "things done". If so, the point would be that *actions* are not marked out as by nature, or intrinsically, to be done or not to be done. This might in turn be understood either as a point about the metaphysics of value – in the nature of things, there aren't determinate values – or as a point about our lack of epistemic access to such values (if any). If it is the former, we might still think of Pyrrho as holding an indeterminacy view; but it would be limited to values rather than applying to the world quite generally. But I am not sure we should assume that his ideas were focused enough to permit a clear distinction between these two possibilities.

The picture of Pyrrho's thought as limited to the evaluative domain may receive some support from the evidence of Cicero. Cicero several times reports that Pyrrho refused to admit distinctions of value (*Fin.* 2.43, 3.11-12, *Off.* 1.6). Cicero's portrait of Pyrrho is distorted; he consistently associates Pyrrho with the early Stoic Aristo of Chios, and sometimes another Stoic, Herillus, ascribing to all of them the view that virtue is the sole good and vice the sole bad thing (*Fin.*

¹⁵ For the view that most of the passage is Timon rather than Pyrrho, see Brunshwig 1994; Warren 2002, chapter 4; Marchand 2018, chapter 1.

4.49, 60, plus the texts just cited). This is standard Stoic doctrine, but these two extremist Stoics rejected the usual Stoic distinction between preferred and dispreferred indifferents; except for virtue and vice, on their view, there are no distinctions of value at all. Cicero's association of Pyrrho with them is surely mistaken concerning the point about virtue and vice, which is clearly Stoic; it looks as if he has overinterpreted a source that links these three thinkers on the rejection of value distinctions accepted by almost everyone. But his stress on Pyrrho's rejection of value distinctions, which (aside from the issue of virtue and vice) he would indeed have shared with the extremist Stoics, fits nicely with the value-centered interpretation of his answer to the first question in the Aristocles passage.¹⁶

In any case, I do not see that this much more restricted interpretation of Pyrrho's thought can be ruled out. And if we accept it, then the view sketched in the remainder of the Aristocles passage must be understood as Timon's expansion of Pyrrho's original insight, which was limited to values, into a global position concerning everything we encounter, or think we encounter, in the world around us. This global position may in turn be understood either as holding quite generally that things are indeterminate, or as claiming that we cannot know how things are by nature, and then (in either case) instructing us to react accordingly and promising tranquility as the result. Here too, I now think that there is no secure way to choose between the metaphysical and the epistemic reading of the passage. But if we take the restricted view of Pyrrho's contribution, this unresolved question concerns Timon, not Pyrrho.

The restricted view is not beyond all doubt; it is possible that the entire Aristocles passage does consist of a report by Timon of Pyrrho's thought, with which he presumably agrees. But aside from the mostly value-centered character of our other evidence on Pyrrho, one further indication in favor of the idea that the Aristocles passage is mostly Timon, and not Pyrrho, is that Timon, unlike

¹⁶ For further details, see Bett 2000, chapter 2, section 6.

Pyrrho, does seem to have engaged in philosophical debate on a wide variety of topics. Diogenes Laertius (9.105) attributes to him a work called *On the Senses* and Sextus (*M* 3.2) a work called *Against the Physicists*. In the same passage Sextus says that Timon questioned whether anything should be accepted by hypothesis, which sounds like an early version of one of the later Pyrrhonists' Five Modes. And according to Sextus elsewhere (*M* 6.66, *M* 10.197), Timon asserted that no process divisible into temporal parts can take place in an indivisible time. The point seems hard to dispute, and one can only wonder about its purpose; but it shows him discussing an intricate issue in which only someone involved in philosophy at a technical level would be expected to take any interest. By contrast, in several verse fragments Timon seems to present Pyrrho as someone quite uninvolved in theoretical pursuits. Later in his chapter on the Pyrrhonists, Aristocles quotes Timon as saying that Pyrrho was untroubled by the "opinions and pointless laying-down of the law" by which most people are afflicted (14.18.19). Diogenes quotes some lines from Timon's *Silloi* addressing Pyrrho, celebrating his freedom from "servitude to opinions" and adding, "You were not concerned to inquire what winds/ Hold sway over Greece, from where everything comes and into what it passes". And some lines quoted by Sextus praise Pyrrho for "paying no attention to the whirls of sweet-voiced wisdom" (*M* 11.1). These eulogies of Pyrrho as serenely unconcerned with theory seem to be at odds with Timon's own apparent interest in theoretical questions. But if there is any truth to them, that would seem to favor attributing the points about the truth-value of our sensations and opinions, and about the precise form of words for conveying our mistrust of them, to Timon and not to Pyrrho.

V

The situation is then as follows. The Aristocles passage may propose an indeterminacy view, or it may assert that we are cut off from knowledge of things in their real nature. And it may tell us what Pyrrho thought, or it may consist largely of Timon's views, with only the answer to the first question

being Pyrrho's. If the latter is the case, then Pyrrho may well have been concerned only with evaluative questions, claiming either the indeterminacy of values or the unknowability of any real values, or, equally likely, speaking and acting in ways that did not clearly differentiate between these two. It seems clear that some saw him as an inspirational figure. However, this may have been not because of any clear philosophical message, but because of the example of imperturbability that he set. And so, as I suggested at the outset, this may be the sense in which his thinking is indeterminate – not in the sense that he held the philosophical doctrine, “reality is indeterminate”. Some people did hold that doctrine, but the evidence is not sufficient for us to tell whether Pyrrho was one of them.

One final consideration may point in favor of the Aristocles passage presenting an indeterminacy view, rather than an epistemic position (now leaving aside whether this is Pyrrho's or, with the possible exception of value indeterminacy, just Timon's). This has to do with the phrase “no more” (*ou mallon*). As I said, in order to read the passage epistemically, the phrase “no more”, as it appears in the form of words the passage prescribes, must be understood as Sextus understands it: that is, as expressing suspension of judgment. It is not, I think, sufficiently recognized that this is an unnatural use of the words “no more”; the plain meaning of “P no more than not-P” is that P is the case to no greater extent than not-P, which is an assertion, not a suspension of judgment. Indeed, Sextus acknowledges this in the chapter on “no more”; he says that the phrase “displays the character of assent and denial” (*PH* 1.191) – in other words, it sounds as if it is making an assertion. And it is precisely this type of assertion that the words the Aristocles passage tells us to say will be making, if the passage is read metaphysically. Of course, since Sextus does use the phrase to express suspension of judgment, it is possible that Pyrrho or Timon did so as well. But I find it more plausible that someone in the Pyrrhonist tradition first used “no more” in its normal usage as an assertion, and that someone later in the tradition, finding the use of the phrase

entrenched but unsuitable for the outlook that then called itself Pyrrhonism, adapted the phrase so that it has the peculiar use that we see in Sextus. Diogenes says that, according to Timon in his work *Pytho*, the phrase means “determining nothing and withholding assent [*aprosthetein*]” (9.76). This certainly can be read as expressing suspension of judgment in the manner of Sextus. But it can equally well be read as asserting that things are to no greater extent one way than the opposite; one is not “determining” things as, or assenting to them being, either F or not-F, for any F, because there is no determinate way they are. And in the same context (9.75-76) Diogenes mentions several other instances of “no more” sentences, all of which are assertions, not expressions of suspension of judgment.

This is a slender basis on which to decide that the Aristocles passage does after all put forward an indeterminacy view. Still, if I had to bet on whether or not this was so, I would place my bet in favor. But my level of confidence in this bet would be pretty low.

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