

Relativity in Early Pyrrhonism

I

Relativity has a prominent place in the developed form of Pyrrhonian skepticism that we find in Sextus Empiricus. The most obvious case of this is the Ten Modes (*PH* 1.35-163). Here Sextus frequently says that we can say how things appear in *certain circumstances*, or *to certain people*, or to people *in certain states*, but that we are not in a position to say how things are absolutely or in their true nature. He describes these appearances as either “relative to the one judging” (*pros to krinon*) or “relative to the things observed at the same time” (*pros ta suntheôroumena*, *PH* 1.135), and all of the Ten Modes are classified as depending on relativities of one or both of these kinds (*PH* 1.38). Moreover, the Mode of Relativity itself is singled out as the most general form of the Ten Modes (*PH* 1.39). Somewhat confusingly, the Mode of Relativity also features as a particular member of the Ten Modes. In Sextus’ order it comes eighth out of the ten (*PH* 1.135-40); but Diogenes Laertius, perhaps in recognition of its general status, puts it last in his order (9.87-8), and Aristocles concludes his very brief allusions to these Modes as propounded by Aenesidemus (nine, according to him, not ten, but it is clearly the same set) with the words “everything ... is said relatively” (*panta ... pros ti legomena*, in Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.18.11-12).

Since the Ten Modes are associated with Aenesidemus (on this, see also Sextus, *M* 7.345, *DL* 9.87), the importance of relativity in Pyrrhonism clearly precedes Sextus. One should not, of course, confuse skepticism, which consists in

suspension of judgment, with *relativism*, which, in any of its many forms, is a definite view about the way things are¹. But one way to generate suspension of judgment about how things really are is to emphasize that our perspectives on things are inevitably relative in the ways drawn attention to in the Ten Modes, the assumption being that this constitutes a limitation or a distortion; to see things in their true nature, we would need access to them independent of these relativities². It is a disputed question whether relativity played a different and more central role in the Pyrrhonism of Aenesidemus, as compared with that of Sextus³. But even if we confine ourselves to Sextus, observations concerning relativity are clearly a valuable tool in his Pyrrhonist project. While the Ten Modes themselves are rarely referred to outside the lengthy passage of the first book of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* where they are introduced⁴, it is not hard to find the same kinds of observations about relativity elsewhere in Sextus' work. Summing up a discussion of attitudes towards death, he says that all such matters are "subject to convention and relative" (*nomista ... kai pros ti, PH 3.232*). In *Against the Ethicists* he declares that everything that happens is relative, and therefore any given type of event will turn out as either worth choosing

¹ On this, see Annas & Barnes 1985, 96-8; Barnes 1988.

² As a reviewer for this volume pointed out, this limitation could also be taken as a reason *for* adopting a relativist stance, where one endorses one's judgments while acknowledging their relativity. But it seems clear that this option never occurred to any of the ancient Greek skeptics; for them, any genuine judgment about things would have to concern their non-relative, objective character, and relativity is an obstacle to this. I would go further and claim that in this respect, the skeptics are simply in the mainstream of ancient Greek philosophy. But that would require a much longer discussion (though Bett 1989 is relevant), and other contributors to this volume may view things differently.

³ Woodruff 1988 and Bett 2000, chapter 4 argue for this; a contrary view is Schofield 2007.

⁴ This is detailed in Bett 2019, section I.

or to be avoided, depending on the circumstances (*M* 11.118). And in discussing the skeptics' distinctive phrases, he says that their significance is relative to the skeptics themselves: that is, I take it, their significance in the skeptics' mouths depends on the specific contexts in which they, as opposed to other people, use them (*PH* 1.207). While these are all cases where the phrase *pros ti* actually occurs, they are certainly not the only places in Sextus where the same kind of comment could have been made.

Nor does this exhaust the kinds of use Sextus makes of concepts of relativity in his arguments against the dogmatists. Several times he observes that since two things are relative to one another, they must be grasped simultaneously with one another – which contradicts what the dogmatists wish to say about these things; this difficulty, he claims, applies to causes and their effects (*PH* 3.25-7, *M* 9.234), signs and what is signified by them (*PH* 2.117-20, 125, *M* 8.161-5, 273), demonstration and what is demonstrated (*M* 8.394), and, as specific instances of demonstration, the antecedent and consequent of an argument (*PH* 2.169), as well as proof of the existence of god and the god whose existence is proved (*PH* 3.7). The reasoning in these passages is often rather questionable. For example, from the fact that the notions of sign and thing signified are conceptually interdependent – which is a legitimate point about their relativity to one another – it certainly does not follow that the thing signified reveals itself at the same time as, and in the same way as, the sign itself (which would mean that the former was not, after all, *signified by*

something else and the latter was not a *sign of* something else)⁵. Another type of anti-dogmatic argument revolves around the idea that relatives are not real, but “are only conceived” (*(epi)noeitai monon*) – this by contrast with non-relative items, which are said to be as they are “by nature” (*phusei*). Sextus employs this form of argument to show that there is no such thing as what is true (*M* 8.37-9); cause (*M* 9.207-8) and demonstration (*M* 8.453-62, cf. 8.335) get this treatment too. Again, there is much we might wish to take issue with here; dependence on something else is by no means obviously an indicator of unreality. I mention these examples simply to reaffirm the significant role that relativity, understood explicitly as such, plays in the Pyrrhonism of Sextus.

When we come to the earliest phase of Pyrrhonism, as represented by Pyrrho himself and his disciple and biographer Timon of Phlius, the story is very different. I have not been able to find a single explicit reference to relativity in the evidence concerning these two. One reason for this may well be the paucity of that evidence itself. But another reason, I think, is what kind of philosopher our limited evidence shows Pyrrho to have been; explicit discussion of relativity tends towards the technical, and this simply does not seem to have been Pyrrho’s style. The same was perhaps not true of Timon; we do hear of his intervention in philosophical debates characteristic of insiders to the field. Unfortunately, these reports are very sketchy and have nothing to do with relativity.

Despite these obstacles, I think we can see a significant role for relativity in the evidence on early Pyrrhonism. What exactly that role was depends on how we

⁵ The difficulties with several of these arguments, and the assumptions underlying them, are well discussed in Duncombe 2020, chapter 11.

interpret Pyrrho's and Timon's thought, and that is a matter fraught with controversy. But whichever way we read their thought, relativity of some kind is at least implicit, and this is an important aspect of the connection, such as it is, between early Pyrrhonism and the later movement that claimed inspiration from it. The remainder of this chapter will fill out the claims I have made in this paragraph and the last.

II

Most of what we hear about Pyrrho concerns his attitudes in ordinary life. The fullest set of anecdotes of this kind occurs in Diogenes Laertius' life of Pyrrho (9.61-108), though they can also be found in several other authors. In telling these stories, Diogenes frequently cites Antigonus of Carystus, a biographer of the mid-third century BCE – and hence not contemporary with Pyrrho (c.360-270 BCE), but much closer to him in date than almost any other source except Timon. Regardless of his proximity to Pyrrho, his account needs to be treated with caution. His lives of philosophers – he wrote about many others besides Pyrrho⁶ – belong to a genre of philosophical biography that favors gossip over either historical accuracy or intellectual rigor. However, the picture we get from Antigonus is both internally consistent and consistent with reports from other sources; most of these are later and may sometimes be drawing on Antigonus himself, but Diogenes also cites Eratosthenes (c.285-194 BCE) and Pyrrho's follower Philo of Athens (9.66, 67). It is also consistent with the few indications of Pyrrho's practical attitudes that can be drawn from Timon, who in several fragments describes his demeanor, sometimes

⁶ The evidence is collected in Dorandi 1999.

while personally addressing him. While it would clearly be unwise to accept the literal truth of any particular story concerning what Pyrrho did or said, the biographical material on Pyrrho, in Diogenes and elsewhere, collectively shows us at least the image that Pyrrho was widely understood to project.

That image is one of an extraordinary lack of concern for things that most of us care about. There is lack of concern, first of all, for social convention: he takes animals to the market, washes a pig, and does the housework (DL 9.66), oblivious to normal class and gender expectations. There is lack of concern for normal human relations: he goes off and lives by himself, rarely showing his face to his family, or sometimes leaves his home town without warning and wanders around with strangers; he keeps talking when his interlocutor has departed; and he ignores his teacher Anaxarchus when he sees him lying in a ditch (for which he receives Anaxarchus' compliments) (DL 9.63). There is also lack of concern for things that would generally be found terrifying: he shows no reaction when subjected to ancient surgical techniques to heal a wound (DL 9.67), and he remains calm on a ship in a storm, pointing to a pig (who is calmly munching its food) as a model for humans to emulate (DL 9.68, Plutarch, *Prof. virt.* 82E-F). One story shows him lapsing from this habitual calm: he is scared by an aggressive dog and climbs a tree (DL 9.66, Aristocles in Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.18.26). The moral Pyrrho draws, in both sources (no doubt going back to Antigonos, whom Aristocles cites), is that "it is difficult to strip off the human being [*ekdunai ton anthrôpon*]"; but divesting oneself of such normal human reactions is clearly the ideal to aspire to.

This ideal is also referred to in these anecdotes with several terms employing the negative prefix *a-*, all of them close to my recurring phrase “lack of concern”. There is *adiaphoria*, “indifference” (DL 9.66); there is *ataraxia*, “freedom from disturbance” (DL 9.68); and there is *apatheia*, “not being affected” (Plutarch, *Prof. virt.* 82F). In addition, these words correspond closely to the image of Pyrrho that we find in the fragments of Timon. Most of Timon’s surviving words come from his poem *Silloi* (*Lampoons*), and most of the fragments from this poem are satirical (and in most cases harshly critical) portraits of dead philosophers; as has long been recognized, the poem was framed as a mock-underworld scene⁷. But one four-line passage (quoted by Aristocles in Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.18.19) describes Pyrrho himself (presumably also in Hades):

But such he was – I saw him, the man without vanity and unbroken

By all the things by which both the unknown and the celebrated among mortals are overpowered,

Empty hosts of people, weighed down on this side and that

By passions [*patheôn*], opinion, and pointless laying down of the law⁸.

Another fragment, which can be assembled from three passages of Diogenes (9.65) and Sextus (*M* 11.1, *M* 1.305), comes, as Diogenes tells us, from another poem, *Indalmoi* (*Images*), and speaks directly to Pyrrho:

⁷ This is discussed in detail in Clayman 2009, chapter 3.

⁸ Aristocles does not tell us that these lines come from the *Silloi*, but this seems clear not just from the meter, but from the opening phrase “such he was – I saw him”, which (like many similar phrases in the *Silloi* fragments) recall Odysseus’ language in the original underworld scene, *Odyssey* book 11. (Timon is not the first to employ this motif; another famous case is Plato, *Protagoras* 315c8.) In this and the other fragments quoted here, I follow (with slight modifications) the translations in Bett 2000, 70-71; see the footnotes on those pages for discussion of minor textual issues.

This, Pyrrho, my heart longs to hear
However you, a man, conduct yourself with the greatest ease and tranquility
Always heedless and uniformly unmoved
Paying no attention to the whirls of sweet-voiced wisdom.
You alone lead humans in the manner of the god
Who revolves driving around the whole earth
Showing the flaming circle of his well-turned sphere.

Finally, a single line quoted by Sextus (*M* 11.141) very probably referred to Pyrrho's demeanor:

When I perceived him, then, in windless calm⁹.

To return to the three negative terms cited at the start of this paragraph: *apatheia* echoes the freedom from *pathê*, "passions", attributed to Pyrrho in the first passage of Timon; *ataraxia* is very close in sense to the *hêsuchiê*, "tranquility", he is credited with in the second passage, and it is clearly much the same that is symbolized by the "windless calm" of the third; and an attitude of *adiaphoria*, "indifference", towards everything that most people say (and are bothered by) is evident in at least the first and second passages.

Let us take this composite picture, then, as capturing the state of mind that Pyrrho was thought to have achieved, including by his closest associate Timon. Now, what does any of this have to do with relativity? The stories themselves do not offer any information on that subject, nor does Timon's portrait in the verse fragments I just quoted; and indeed, there is no inherent reason why someone who cultivated

⁹ This is generally thought to derive from the *Silloi*, given the words *ton d' ... enoês'*, "I perceived him" (see the previous note); for some doubts, see Bett 1997, 162.

attitudes of this kind would need to have been inspired by any thoughts concerning relativity. But Diogenes begins his life of Pyrrho with a few remarks on Pyrrho's more general philosophical outlook, and these may begin to suggest a connection.

Diogenes tells us that Pyrrho "said that nothing is either fine nor 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). He goes on to say that Pyrrho's lifestyle was consistent with these ideas (9.62). To illustrate this point, he claims that Pyrrho would not avoid things like oncoming wagons or the edges of precipices, and would have to be rescued from these perils by his friends. The examples recall the kind of thing that Aristotle says would happen to someone who denied the Principle of Non-Contradiction (see especially *Met.* 1008b12-20); and it is fair to assume that what Diogenes naively passes on as biography actually began as a critique, describing how (in the critic's view) someone with Pyrrho's attitudes *would* have to act in order to be consistent¹⁰. Sextus is well aware of, and takes the trouble to respond to, the idea that it is impossible to live as a skeptic (*PH* 1.21-4), and so do the skeptically inclined Academics Arcesilaus and Carneades (Sextus, *M* 7.158, 166-89); it would not be surprising if Pyrrho was the target of similar criticisms. But if we reject the notion that Pyrrho's behavior was truly self-destructive, it is still worth asking whether the lifestyle depicted in the other evidence we looked at, centered around a radical lack of concern, might be an expression of the ideas Diogenes sketched.

¹⁰ This is discussed in more detail in Bett 2000, 67-9.

Here is one way we might connect the two. Pyrrho is supposed to have held that “humans do everything by convention and habit”. Now, this does not sound much like him – his own behavior appears very unconventional. But maybe “humans” means “people in general”. The remark is connected with the claims that “nothing is so in reality” and that “each thing is no more this than that”. The idea may be that the values shaping people’s actions have no real basis in the nature of things; nothing is *really* worth choosing or avoiding – the way people generally decide what to do is simply a product of society’s norms and the habituation they undergo in youth. However, if one comes to realize this, as Pyrrho himself does, then these norms and habitual ways of acting may feel much less important than they used to. And in that case, one might act very differently from the mass of humanity, simply following whatever inclinations seize one at the time. But however one acts, one will be much less concerned about the outcome than if one thought certain things were really, in the nature of things, good or bad, right or wrong, and so on. And so – here we can introduce relativity – the way people decide what to do is relative, rather than being based on perceptions (correct or incorrect) of any objective evaluative truths¹¹. For most people, it is relative to the norms of their society and the way they have been raised. For Pyrrho himself, and others who have come to understand this, it need not be relative to these, but it will still be relative to how one feels like acting on a given occasion – which could itself be a product of all kinds of factors, such as what one has just eaten, who one has been talking to

¹¹ Again (compare n.2), the assumption is that objective truth is the only kind there is; endorsing one’s own set of beliefs while acknowledging its mere conventionality is simply not recognized as an option. On this, see further Bett 2024, 32-4. Thanks again to the reviewer for pushing me to make this point explicit.

recently, and so on. And this insight into the relativity of human action makes one much calmer.

This way of reading Diogenes' remarks is not beyond question. First, the words "nothing is so in reality" and "each thing is no more this than that" sound wholly general, as if they apply to much more than just practical or evaluative questions. On the other hand, the specific cases used to introduce these words are fine [*kalon*] and foul [*aischron*], just [*dikaion*] and unjust [*adikon*], and the moral drawn from them is the practical point about convention and habit. Diogenes also ascribes the lunatic behavior he goes on to mention to a quite comprehensive distrust of the senses (9.62); but if we dismiss this as a misunderstanding, a narrower interpretation focused just on values may still hold water. Still, the fact that Diogenes could see distrust of the senses as a consequence of "each thing is no more this than that" suggests that he, or his source, read it as a more general thesis. The second problem is that Diogenes also speaks of Pyrrho as introducing the form of philosophy centered around "inability to grasp" [*akatalêpsia*] and "suspension of judgment" [*epochê*] (9.61). But suspending judgment about things and withdrawing any claim to grasp their nature is not the same as asserting that nothing is fine or foul, just or unjust, or that in general "nothing is so in reality". Either the reference to suspension of judgment is a mistaken assimilation of Pyrrho to the later Pyrrhonism of Sextus, or Diogenes has misstated the other point: he should have said that *nothing can be ascertained* as being fine or foul, etc. In the latter case, one would also have to take the words "no more" in "each thing is no more this than

that” in the peculiar way that Sextus does, as an expression of suspension of judgment (*PH* 1.188-91).

There are limits, then, to how much one can extract from Diogenes’ testimony. Nonetheless, we have an inkling of how relativity could have featured in the cluster of attitudes that our evidence associates with Pyrrho. And we can build on this in looking at the most important text about Pyrrho’s and Timon’s philosophy: the opening of the chapter on Pyrrhonism by the Peripatetic Aristocles that we have already had reason to mention. Unfortunately the very same uncertainties we have found with Diogenes – whether Pyrrho’s thought was just about evaluative questions or was wholly general, and whether he made assertions (albeit negative ones) about the way things are or avoided all claims to know – also plague this passage of Aristocles. But however we read it, some kind of relativity emerges as part of the story.

III

Several chapters from Aristocles’ *On Philosophy* [*Peri Philosophias*] are quoted by the Christian author Eusebius (late third to early fourth century) in his *Preparation for the Gospel*; one of these is a chapter on Pyrrhonian skeptics, which Eusebius says he is quoting verbatim (14.17.10)¹². As we have seen, some of this chapter deals with Aenesidemus, who appears to be relatively recent in Aristocles’ time (“yesterday and the day before”, 14.18.29); but much of it deals with Pyrrho and Timon, and it begins with a brief summary of Pyrrho’s and Timon’s thought (14.18.1-4). Aristocles opens by saying that Pyrrho was among those who held that “we are of a nature to

¹² The texts are collected, with translation and commentary, in Chiesara 2001.

know nothing" (14.18.1-2). He then says that Pyrrho left nothing in writing, but that Timon identifies three questions that must be answered if one is to achieve happiness: first, what are things like by nature; second, how should we be disposed towards them; and third, what will be the payoff for those who have adopted the requisite attitude (14.18.2)? One of the major controversies about the passage is how much of what follows represents the views of Pyrrho (reported by Timon, who presumably agrees with him) and how much creative extensions of those views by Timon. I shall return to this issue at the end of this section.

It is also worth asking about the quality of Aristocles' information concerning what Timon said; but here we can be reasonably confident. Aristocles does not tell us which work of Timon (if any) he is drawing on. However, he does refer to two of Timon's works later in the chapter (14.18.14, 14.18.28) and quotes several lines of his verse; in addition, in our short passage, he says "Timon [or "he", meaning Timon] says" three times. It is a fair assumption that he is reading Timon's own works or at least a detailed summary of them by someone else¹³. To this we can add that several important terms are uncharacteristic of either later Pyrrhonism or of Aristocles himself, which suggests that he is reproducing some of Timon's own vocabulary¹⁴; and that in other chapters, when we have independent access to the ideas Aristocles discusses, he seems to be a responsible and accurate reporter, at least when those ideas were available to him in systematic written form¹⁵.

¹³ Chiesara 2001, 87-9 favors the latter, more cautious alternative.

¹⁴ On this, see Bett 2000, 15; Chiesara 2001, 89.

¹⁵ On this, see Bett 1994, section VI.

The answer to the first of the three questions is explicitly given as Pyrrho's. Aristocles says that "he [Timon] says that he [Pyrrho] declared that things [*ta pragmata*] are equally *adiaphora* and *astathmêta* and *anepikrita*" (14.18.3). Leaving aside, for the moment, the question what these "things" might be, how are we to understand the three epithets? *Adiaphora* is generally translated "indifferent". But is the focus on the intrinsic character of the things – in themselves they possess no differentiating features – or on our epistemic relation to them – *we* are not capable of discriminating their features? The other two epithets end with the suffix *-ta*, which, in conjunction with the negative prefix *a-*, generally indicates something not achieved or not *to be* achieved; in this case, "not [to be] measured" and "not [to be] determined". This may seem to point towards an epistemic reading. But though the words do thus indicate our failure or inability to measure or to determine how things are, the question remains whether Pyrrho *merely* means to draw attention to an epistemic shortcoming of ours, or whether he is pointing to something in the things themselves that is *responsible* for our not managing to arrive at any definite conception of them. "Things are not to be measured or determined" might very easily be intended to convey that things in themselves are of an inherently indeterminate character¹⁶. The issue, then, is whether Pyrrho has given a direct answer to the first question, what things are like by nature, saying that in their true

¹⁶ In texts of the fifth and fourth century BCE, *asthathmêtos* means "unbalanced" or "unstable" (*stathmos* is a balance), which seems to indicate an objective property of something; for references, see LSJ and Decleva Caizzi 1981, 224 (226 in the 2020 reprint). But *stathmêtos* means "to be measured" (*stathmê* is a ruler), so *asthathmêtos* could surely mean "not to be measured". My point is that even if we read it this way, the issue that interests us here remains open. Castagnoli 2002, 447 was right to criticize my use of "indeterminate" as a *translation* of *anepikrita*; but (as he allowed) that does not settle the broader matter of interpretation.

nature they lack all definite characteristics, or whether he has answered this question by saying “we are not in a position to determine what things are like in their real natures”. Again, on the face of it, both are perfectly possible.

Scholars have labored mightily to decide between these two alternatives, mainly by examining the reasoning that follows this initial statement in response to the first question. Unfortunately, I do not think this is ever likely to be settled in a way that commands general satisfaction. The passage continues, according to the text in the manuscripts of Eusebius, with “For this reason, neither our sensations nor our opinions tell the truth or lie” (14.18.3). On the epistemic reading, this may be because our cognitive faculties fail to tell us anything about the world as it really is. For our sensations or opinions to tell the truth or lie, they would need *both* to present a certain appearance of things *and* to present this (truly or falsely) *as* how things actually are. But since, as we have just been told, we are not in a position to determine how things actually are, our sensations and opinions cannot do this. *All* they can do is register how things appear; they do not have the independent access to things that would allow them to make any claims (honest or dishonest) of the second kind, and hence they are neither truth-tellers nor liars¹⁷. Alternatively, proponents of an epistemic reading sometimes change the manuscript text: instead of “for this reason” [*dia touto*], they read “on account of the fact that” [*dia to*]. This makes the claim about our sensations and opinions the basis for the statement about the nature of things, not an inference from it: we are not in a position to

¹⁷ This is the reading of Green 2017, which emphasizes Timon’s remarks “But the apparent utterly dominates, wherever it goes” and “That honey is sweet I do not posit; that it appears so I concede”, quoted by Diogenes (9.105 – I follow Green’s translations).

determine the nature of things *because* our sensations and opinions are neither truth-tellers nor liars – where this, in turn, is to be understood as “are neither *habitual, or reliable, truth-tellers or liars*”¹⁸. The change to the text has some linguistic plausibility, although it is by no means mandatory; and the use of “tell the truth” [*alêtheuein*] and “lie” [*pseudesthai*] as referring to the general reliability or unreliability of our faculties seems to echo Aristocles’ usage in other chapters¹⁹.

Finally, one can keep the manuscript text “for this reason” and understand the inference as following from the assertion that things are indeterminate in their natures. Since things in themselves have no fixed or definite features, our sensations and opinions – which present things as in various ways definite – are not true²⁰. But they are not false, either. It is not so obvious why this should be, but one possibility is that the indeterminate reality has aspects that to some extent do answer to the (all too definite) content of our sensations and opinions. Suppose, for example, that reality is indeterminate because it is constantly changing; it has no stable or permanent features, but displays different characteristics at different times, or perhaps to different people at the same time. We can find ideas of this kind – applied, of course, to the world that the senses perceive, not to the intelligible Forms

¹⁸ The emendation was originally proposed by the 19th century German scholar Eduard Zeller. It is supported by Stopper 1983, n.53; Brennan 1998, especially 432-3; Perin 2018, 27.

¹⁹ As shown by Brennan 1998, 426-32.

²⁰ To the objection that “things are indeterminate in their natures” would itself be an opinion (stressed by Green 2017, 359-60), it can be replied that *doxa*, “opinion”, is frequently used in Greek philosophy to indicate an inferior or questionable cognitive state; so understood, the claim about the indeterminate nature of things would transcend mere “opinion”. The same applies to the injunction just below to be “unopinionated” [*adoxastous*] – see my next paragraph.

– in certain parts of Plato²¹. In that case someone’s impression of a rock as red might reflect something the rock is actually manifesting on that particular occasion in relation to that particular perceiver; this impression, then, is not simply false. But since the impression presents the rock’s redness as a fixed characteristic of the rock, which it is not (it does not have any fixed characteristics), we cannot go so far as to call the impression true.

We now have the answer to the second of the three initial questions, how we should be disposed towards things. The text continues “For this reason, then, one should not trust them” (that is, our sensations and opinions), and that we should be “unopinionated, free of inclinations and unwavering” (14.18.3); whatever precisely is conveyed by the last few words, we may assume they are telling us not to lapse from this attitude of mistrust. On any of the readings we have just been considering, this mistrust consists in not treating our sensations and opinions as showing us how things are in their real nature. (That is, of course, quite different from ignoring oncoming wagons or the edges of cliffs; but here may be the origin of the criticism to that effect that Diogenes passes on as biography in his life of Pyrrho.)

We are then told that this attitude should be expressed by “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”. It is generally agreed that, as often in Greek philosophy, “is” here is short for “is ...”, where the gap is filled by some predicate; to say that something “no more is than

²¹ See especially the end of *Republic* book V (476a-479e), with its emphasis on the fleeting character of what the “lover of sights and sounds” perceives, and parts of the discussion of Protagoras’ “Measure” thesis in the *Theaetetus*: especially the “secret doctrine” (152d-157c) and the extreme Heraclitean view of total instability (179e-183b). Other relevant passages are *Phaedo* 78e, *Symposium* 207d-208b.

is not” is thus to say that it no more is than is not red, or large, or whatever the characteristic in question might be. What is not agreed is how the various components of this complex utterance are to be divided; the Greek seems to allow for understanding it as composed of either three or four different elements. Either we are being told to say that each thing

- i) no more is [a certain way] than it is not, or [that it]
- ii) both is and is not, or [that it]
- iii) neither is nor is not;

or we are being told to say that it no more

- i) is [a certain way] than
- ii) is not or
- iii) both is and is not or
- iv) neither is nor is not.

In the first case we have three alternative ways of speaking. In the second case we have a single way of speaking that puts all four of “is”, “is not”, “both” and “neither” on a par, none of them holding any more than any other. Linguistic and philosophical arguments have been offered for each of these two options, and there is no consensus. There is also controversy over how to understand the phrase “no more” [*ou mallon*].

I shall return to consider the various things that might be meant by the words we are told to use about “every single thing” [*henos hekastou*]. For it is here above all that relativity surfaces, in one way or another. But first I conclude the discussion of the passage as a whole. The final portion of the text answers the third

original question, what the results will be for those who adopt the recommended attitude (14.18.4). Aristocles says that the results according to Timon will be first *aphasia*, but then *ataraxia*; he adds that Aenesidemus gives pleasure as the result, but this need not reflect anything in early Pyrrhonism. There is some debate about how to understand *aphasia* – is it literal speechlessness, or is it some kind of withdrawal from definite assertions (as Sextus uses the term, *PH* 1.192-3)²²? – but *ataraxia*, “freedom from disturbance”, is familiar to us both from the Pyrrhonism of Sextus and also, as we saw, from some of the biographical material on Pyrrho. *Why* this should be the result would deserve further discussion, but it is peripheral to the concerns of this volume.

There are, then, two broad ways of reading the passage (and, as we shall see in the next section, the “no more” utterance can be accommodated to either one). These have generally been called the Epistemological and the Metaphysical readings. Either the main idea is that we cannot determine the nature of things, and it follows that our sense-impressions and thoughts about things cannot be trusted to capture their true character; or the main idea is that the nature of things is in itself indeterminate, and it follows that our sense-impressions and thoughts about things, which present the world as definite in various ways, do not accurately reflect how things really are – though they do not entirely misrepresent them either. But this does not exhaust the range of alternatives. A further division of opinion has to do with a question I touched on earlier: how much of this is Pyrrho and how much is Timon? As I noted, the answer to the first of the three questions, what is the nature

²² The word in this context is discussed in detail in Brunschwig 1997; see also Bett 2000, 37-9.

of things, is specifically given as Pyrrho's (as reported by Timon). But this is the only place in the passage where Pyrrho's own views are explicitly mentioned²³.

Elsewhere, as we have seen, we are told what *Timon* said, but Pyrrho himself is never again mentioned. Now, one might say that Aristocles' purpose in introducing Timon is precisely to show us what Pyrrho thought; Pyrrho wrote nothing, but Timon did, and he tells us what Pyrrho's ideas were. But this is not obvious. While Aristocles clearly thinks of Timon's words as the next best thing to writings of Pyrrho himself, it does not follow that Aristocles thought Timon was reporting Pyrrho's views (except in the place where he actually says this); he might have thought that, since Pyrrho wrote nothing, the closest we can get to Pyrrho's ideas are Timon's own (written) ideas. Or even if Aristocles did think Timon was transmitting the ideas of Pyrrho, it does not follow that *we* should think so.

Thus another strand of interpretation holds that Pyrrho should be credited only with the opening claim about the nature of things; all the rest – which may, in turn, be read either in epistemological or in metaphysical fashion – is due to Timon²⁴. And if we take just this opening claim, in conjunction with the other evidence about Pyrrho, which is overwhelmingly of an ethical or practical character, it is very tempting to read it, too, as a claim about values – much as I tentatively read Diogenes' remarks about Pyrrho's thinking in the last section. The “things” [*pragmata*] that are indifferent, etc., are our practical concerns; no course of action

²³ Except for the opening statement that Pyrrho was among those who held that “we are of a nature to know nothing”, which is Aristocles' verdict and may be based on his impressions of Aenesidemus, whose ideas he treats throughout the chapter as equivalent to those of Timon, rather than on anything from Timon himself.

²⁴ See Brunschwig 1994; Warren 2002, chapter 4; Marchand 2018, chapter 1.

is (or perhaps, can be ascertained to be) inherently, or by nature, worth choosing or avoiding. And their indifference would be reflected in the attitude of “indifference” [*adiaphoria*] that the anecdotes about Pyrrho emphasize. Indeed, the word *pragmata* itself, though it can be as broad and general as our “things”, originally was a “thing done” (from the verb *prassô*, “do” or “act”), and continues to have connotations of “affairs” or “business” – the etymological connection with our own word “practical” is no accident. Arguably, then, Pyrrho’s own contribution was limited to the practical realm, and it is Timon who has greatly broadened the range of “things” under discussion, and extended Pyrrho’s thinking into a quite general epistemological or metaphysical position.

IV

What, then, of the words that (according either to Pyrrho and Timon jointly, or to Timon alone) we should say “about every single thing” as an expression of our lack of trust in sensation and opinion? As we saw, these words can be read in a three-part or a four-part fashion; and the whole passage can be read either epistemologically or metaphysically. There are thus four options to consider.

Three-part, Epistemological. On the Epistemological interpretation, “no more F than not-F” is best read as Sextus reads it, as suspending judgment between the alternatives F and not-F (*PH* 1.188-91). I said that this usage was peculiar; the plain meaning of “X is no more F than not-F” is “X has the feature F to no greater extent than it has the feature not-F”, which is an assertion, not a suspension of

judgment²⁵. But since Sextus does use it in this way, his predecessor Pyrrho may have done the same. If so, then to say about each thing that it “no more is than is not” is just what one would expect for someone who thinks that we cannot determine the nature of things. But what of the other two parts, “both is and is not” and “neither is nor is not”? These would have to be understood as further possible alternatives: maybe X is both F and not-F, or maybe it is neither. The first part suspended judgment as to whether it is F or not-F, on the assumption that it must be one or the other; the other two parts abandon that assumption, thereby widening the range of possibilities still further. This strikes me as somewhat unnatural, but I am not sure it can be ruled out.

Four-part, Epistemological. A proponent of the Epistemological interpretation would do better, I think, to adopt the four-part reading of what we should say²⁶. In this case “is”, “is not”, “both” and “neither” are all on a par; each of them is “no more” to be adopted than any of the others. If “no more” is understood as expressing suspension of judgment, this means that one is to suspend judgment about all four of the alternatives “X is F”, “X is not-F”, “X is both F and not-F” and “X is

²⁵ This point is often passed over, and Sextus’ usage is often accepted as normal. But Sextus himself says that “no more” “displays the character of assent and denial” (*PH* 1.191); that is, it sounds as if it is making an assertion. And there are plenty of earlier uses in which it is clearly doing just that, as recognized already by DeLacy 1958. See also Bett 2000, 30-2; Bett 2020, 149-50.

²⁶ I am not aware of any adherent of the Epistemological interpretation who argues for the three-part reading. Stopper 1983 and Perin 2018 (who clearly favors the Epistemological Interpretation, while giving an even-handed survey of both the main options) opt for the four-part reading. Svavarsson 2004 and Svavarsson 2010 favor the three-part reading, but Svavarsson’s interpretation of the passage is an unusual hybrid of epistemological and metaphysical elements.

neither F nor not-F". The effect is the same as on the three-part reading, but it is attained in a rather more straightforward way.

Three-part, Metaphysical. On the Metaphysical interpretation of the passage, the "no more" phrase is read in its plain sense, as asserting that something has a certain feature to no greater extent than it does not have it. If things are in their real nature indeterminate, this is just what one would expect; to return to my previous example, the rock is not in its true nature red any more than it is not-red – as far as the presence or absence of redness is concerned (but of course, redness is just one example, out of an indefinite number) it does not have a nature that leans either one way or the other. Why, then, would one go on to give the alternatives "both" and "neither"? Well, if the rock manifests itself as red to one person at one time, but as not-red to another person at another time, there is a sense in which we can say that it is both – though neither redness nor non-redness, of course, are stable and permanent features, features of the rock's *nature*. In that sense, then, we can also say that it is neither; the answers to the questions "Is the rock in its nature red?" and "Is the rock in its nature non-red?" are both "no", because *nothing* is the case, as regards the rock's true nature, when it comes to redness or non-redness (or anything else). The three alternatives, "no more is than is not", "both is and is not", and "neither is nor is not", are thus different but complementary ways of conveying the indeterminacy of a thing's nature.

Four-part, Metaphysical. In this case the expression of indeterminacy is taken to yet another level. Each of the four alternatives "is", "is not", "both" and "neither" holds to no greater extent than any other. This may seem extreme: what

would be wrong with saying that, if things are indeterminate, the rock is in its true nature neither red nor not-red? Of course, a “no more” statement is not necessarily a denial. But to say that all four alternatives are on a par is at least to deny the alternative “neither” a correctness above the others, and this is hard to understand; as I noted just now, that (in an indeterminate reality) the rock is in its true nature neither red nor not-red seems to be something one would want to assert. For this reason the three-part reading seems more congenial to the Metaphysical interpretation²⁷. However, I am not sure we can rule out that the four-part reading was what Timon intended, in view of a striking parallel. I already mentioned that the kind of indeterminacy that seems to be in play on the Metaphysical interpretation has precedents in Plato. In his discussion at the end of *Republic* book V on the philosopher versus the “lover of sights and sounds”, Socrates says that the variable objects that the senses perceive cannot be “fixedly conceived as either being or not being or *both or neither*” (479c4-5)²⁸. Though the point is made in terms of what can be conceived, this is clearly an ontological claim; it is part of an argument to establish the status of sensible things as “between what is and what is not” (479c-d).

We can, then, read the remark about what we should say in terms of either the Epistemological or the Metaphysical interpretation, with the four-part reading seemingly more appropriate to the former and the three-part reading more

²⁷ In Bett 2000, chapter 1 I argued strongly for the four-part reading and the Metaphysical Interpretation. But, as several critics have pointed out, this depended on a peculiar and unsupported conception of falsehood. See Brennan 1998, 421-2; Castagnoli 2002, 446-7; Perin 2018, 28-9.

²⁸ Aulus Gellius, too, says that Pyrrho used the phrase “This thing is no more this way than that way or neither” (11.5.4). However, Gellius seems to read this according to the Epistemological interpretation.

appropriate to the latter. Now, if one asks what ultimately prompted the entire view, the answer must surely be the variability in the way the world strikes us; I have already suggested this on the metaphysical side, but whether we read the passage metaphysically or epistemologically, it is hard to imagine any other motivation. Things change from one time to another, and things present different impressions to different people, whether because of differing circumstances or differences among the people themselves. How to make sense of this state of affairs had been a preoccupation of Greek philosophy since long before Pyrrho. This is obvious in Plato, but also before him in Heraclitus and Parmenides. Pyrrho or Timon is reacting to the phenomenon of variability either by saying that, in light of it, we cannot determine the true nature of things, or by saying that things have *no* fixed and determinate nature. And either way, it follows that relativity is fundamental to our interactions with the world.

On the Epistemological Interpretation, it is *our impressions* of things that are relative to circumstances and/or persons in the ways just suggested. The rock appears red to some people at some times or in some conditions, and not-red to other people (or maybe to the same people) at other times or in other conditions. How the rock is in itself, we are not in a position to say; we can only say how it seems to us. But we can probably go further than that, and note the sorts of conditions in which, and/or the sorts of people to which, it appears red or not-red. And in that case we can say that the rock's appearance is *relative to* those conditions and/or those people.

On the Metaphysical Interpretation, too, we can speak of the rock's appearance as relative to conditions and/or people. But instead of giving up on saying anything about the rock's true nature, we will say that it is in its true nature indeterminate. And when we talk of how things *appear* – as Timon evidently thought we should do²⁹ – we will mean something different; we will not be talking about possibly mistaken impressions. When we say that the rock *appears* red, or not-red, in certain circumstances and/or to certain people, we will be speaking of a temporary and contingent character that the rock manifests in those cases, as opposed to anything about the rock's nature. "Appears" is not meant to signal that we might not be correct; the redness, or non-redness, is a character that the rock actually does manifest on those occasions. The point is rather that its manifesting of that character is limited to those occasions; it is not part of any fixed and stable nature belonging to the rock. Again, the end of book V of Plato's *Republic* provides a precedent. "Is there any of these many beautiful things that will not also appear ugly?", Socrates imagines asking the "lover of sights and sounds" (479a5-7), and goes on to give several other examples of such "appearances". "Appear ugly" is not meant to imply "but may, for all we know, really be beautiful"; "appear ugly" means "display an ugly character" – this character manifesting itself only in some conditions, not in others, just as the beautiful character these things display is limited to some conditions and not others.

Here, then, is the relativity that is suggested by the Aristocles passage on Pyrrho and Timon. It is not on the surface of the text; the specification of what we

²⁹ See again n.17.

should say “about every single thing” is the closest we come to an explicit expression of it. But if the variability in how things strike us is what motivates the view, then relativity – however exactly one interprets it – is in fact a central aspect of the picture. In a surviving passage of the *Silloi*, Xenophanes, who we know occupied a leading role in the poem, criticizes himself for adopting a monistic position, saying that he was not *amphoterobleptos*, “looking both ways” (quoted in Sextus, *PH* 1.224). Being sensitive to this relativity is what “looking both ways” would amount to; rather than concluding that the world has a single fixed nature – as Xenophanes did, in Timon’s portrayal – one stays alert to its variegated appearance.

If we adopt the view that most of the Aristocles passage represents only the views of Timon, who built on but transformed an original idea of Pyrrho, then the relativity I have been trying to capture is also primarily to be ascribed to Timon. But Pyrrho’s original position, on this reading, might still have had an aspect of relativity to it. To repeat, if Pyrrho simply said that things were “indifferent, not to be measured, and not to be determined”, then given the rest of what we hear about Pyrrho, it is plausible to read this as applying specifically to values rather than to “things” in a more general sense. If so, the relativity of our preferences and decisions would have been a natural implication. At the end of section II, I tentatively read Diogenes Laertius’ opening remarks about Pyrrho along these lines: nothing is inherently, or by nature, worth choosing or avoiding, and the way we act is shaped by – or, relative to – society’s conventions, or perhaps (if one has understood their merely conventional character) one’s own inclinations independent of those

conventions. While Diogenes' wording seemed to suggest a kind of nihilism about values³⁰, one might understand the "indifference" epistemologically rather than ontologically: we are *unable to discern* anything in the nature of things to dictate what we should choose or avoid. But the relativity of our choices to convention or individual inclination would be the same. However, if Pyrrho's own position was limited to a claim about indifference and values, the degree to which he may have been conscious of, or concerned about, implications involving relativity is far from clear.

V

If we adopt this restricted reading of Pyrrho's thought, Pyrrho may well come across as scarcely a philosopher at all. But even if the entire Aristocles passage represents the spelled-out thinking of both Pyrrho and Timon together, it remains true that Pyrrho does not come across as a philosopher of a scholarly or technical kind. We never hear of Pyrrho debating with other philosophers; indeed, two fragments of Timon seem to say quite the opposite. Diogenes Laertius quotes the following lines from the *Silloi* (9.64-5):

Pyrrho, old man, how and whence did you find a way out
From servitude to opinions and empty-mindedness of sophists
And loosened the bonds of every deception and persuasion?
You were not concerned to inquire what winds
Hold sway over Greece, from where everything comes into what it passes³¹.

³⁰ The term "nihilism" is applied to the Diogenes passage in Marchand 2018, 31.

³¹ Again, I draw from the translation in Bett 2000 (cf. n.8).

Diogenes cites this as an example of Pyrrho's *apragmosunês*, which usually means a lack of involvement in politics or business affairs. No doubt Pyrrho fitted that description; but Timon's mention of sophists and of Pyrrho's not "inquiring" suggests rather a lack of involvement in theoretical debates. Similarly, Timon describes Pyrrho, in a passage I quoted in full earlier, as "paying no attention to the whirls of sweet-voiced wisdom" (quoted in Sextus, *M* 11.1)³². In any case, whatever the extent of Pyrrho's views, he appears to have simply said what he had to say and acted accordingly, without attempting to engage with rival philosophical positions. As I suggested, we can perhaps detect an implicit concern with relativity in the stripped down, solely ethical position some have attributed to Pyrrho. We can detect it rather more confidently in the full position expounded in the Aristocles passage – which may have been Pyrrho's as well as Timon's. But in neither case do we see any explicit discussion of relativity as a topic in its own right. By Pyrrho's time, Aristotle had already ventured on sophisticated and technical treatment of the topic, and Plato had done much to pave the way for him. But such matters are outside Pyrrho's sphere of interest; he is just not that kind of philosopher.

The same is not necessarily true of Timon. We hear of his involvement in a debate about the legitimacy of proceeding by hypothesis – that is, unargued assumption (Sextus, *M* 3.2) – and also in a debate about the divisibility of time (Sextus, *M* 6.66, 10.197). Unlike Pyrrho, then, and unlike the image of Pyrrho that he admiringly presents, Timon himself does seem to have taken stands in technical philosophical debates. However, the information we have about his ideas on either

³² We may also note a line of Timon about Pyrrho's follower Philo, described as "not busying himself with opinion and contests" (DL 9.69).

of these topics is extremely limited, and none of it has anything to do with relativity. We can realistically imagine Timon (unlike Pyrrho) explicitly addressing the topic of relativity, but we have no evidence that he did so.

Nonetheless, it is surely no accident that, as I noted at the outset, the later skeptical movement that took inspiration from Pyrrho (presumably, at least in large part, through the medium of Timon), should have given extensive and explicit attention to relativity. The links between Pyrrho and Timon (whatever exactly their thought in fact amounted to) and the later Pyrrhonists are a refusal to attribute fixed and definite features to things as they really are, and a conception of *ataraxia*, “freedom from disturbance”, as the result of that refusal. It is safe to say that, in one way or another, Pyrrho’s and/or Timon’s refusal to pin down the way things really are was connected with a vivid recognition of the variability in the ways things strike us. And from that recognition, it would be a short step to some notion of relativity – even if relativity never surfaces as a topic for discussion in the sketchy sources for early Pyrrhonism.

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