Pyrrhonian Indeterminacy: A Pragmatic Interpretation
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While Pyrrho is considered the founder of a later school of skeptical philosophy, very little is known about his own views. The most enlightening evidence we have is a report via Timon, via Aristocles, via Eusebius:

(1) It is necessary before anything else to investigate concerning our own knowledge; for if we are by nature such as to know nothing, then we must inquire no further concerning other things. In fact, even among the ancients there were some who espoused this view, against whom Aristotle argued. And Pyrrho of Elis was strong in saying such things; but while he left nothing in writing, his pupil Timon says that (2) one intending to be happy must consider these three things: first, how things are by nature; second, in what way we should be disposed towards them; and last, what will come about for those so situated. (3) So then he <Timon> says that he <Pyrrho> declares things equally undifferentiated, unmeasurable, and indeterminate; because of this (διὰ τοῦτο) neither our sense perceptions nor opinions are true or false. (4) Because of this then we must not trust in them, but be unbelieving and uninclining and unshaken, saying about each particular thing that it no more is than is not, or it both is and is not, or it neither is nor is not. For those disposed in this way Timon says that first non-assertion will ensue, then undisturbedness.

The focus of this paper is Pyrrho’s declaration in (3) of how things are by nature: things are ‘equally undifferentiated, unmeasurable, and indeterminate.’ I am concerned first with how this claim is to be inter-
interpreted and then how it could be justified. Let it be noted that the goal is to ascertain what Pyrrho’s view was in fact, and not what his view should have been in order to make his philosophical position self-consistent and consistent with later Pyrrhonism. This statement, which I shall call Pyrrho’s thesis, is standardly interpreted in one of two ways (a third

1 Aristocles, apud Eusebius, Praeparatio evangelica 14.18.1-5 (K. Mras, Berlin 1954-6); Long and Sedley 1F; my translation and divisions. (All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.) While only the statement in (3) is attributed directly to Pyrrho, I am taking whatever is attributed to Timon as Pyrrho’s own, viz. (2)-(4). It is undoubtedly over-optimistic to assume that Timon was a faithful recorder of his teacher’s philosophy, but the evidence is so scant that it is impossible to separate the two men’s views (unlike, e.g., Socrates and Plato); or at least if one separated which reports are attributed to Pyrrho and which to Timon, there would be precious little of Pyrrho left. If Michael Frede is right and ‘the Pyrrho of Timo’s writings represents the doctrine Timo himself developed under Pyrrho’s influence’ (806), it would probably make no difference to the history of philosophy, since everything we know about Pyrrho is filtered through Timon (see A.A. Long’s ‘Timon of Phlius’ for arguments to this effect).

2 τά μὲν οὖν πράγματα ὑπήρξαν αὐτῶν ἀποφαίνειν ἐπὶ ίσης ἀνάφθειρα καὶ ἀστάθμητα καὶ ἀνεκείρητα. It is unclear how we are to understand ἀνάφθειρα, ἀστάθμητα, and ἀνεκείρητα. Long notes: “These three adjectives have sometimes been interpreted in a descriptive rather than a modal sense, “undistinguished” not “undistinguishable” etc. But the second and third have a termination (-tos) which most frequently signifies possibility or necessity, and this interpretation suits the argument better” (Hellenistic Philosophy, 80, n.3). On this see n.10 below. Let me quote a note in M.R. Stopper’s ‘Schizzi Pirroniani’ in full: ‘The phrase ἐπί ίσης ἀνάφθειρα is explained by Ferrari, p.363, as “without any internal differences from one part to another”, by Decleva Caizzi (Pirrone, p.223) as “without any differences from one object to another”. Both scholars take ἀνάφθειρα in an “objective” sense. Decleva Caizzi (ib. p.224) takes ἀστάθμητα in its normal fifth century sense of “unstable”, and thus gives it, too, an “objective” meaning. But ἀνεκείρητα is certainly “subjective” — things are ἀνεκείρητα if we cannot determine what they are like. That, I think, encourages a different construal of ἀστάθμητα: the adjective should mean “unassessable”. And, finally, ἀνάφθειρα may also be given a “subjective” sense: things are ἀνάφθειρα if we cannot distinguish them or cite differentiating facts about them’ (292, n.50). Pace Stopper, it is not certain that ἀνεκείρητα is ‘subjective’. Liddell and Scott, citing this text, translate it as ‘indeterminate’ not ‘indeterminable’. And even if we do translate this adjective subjectively, it need not follow that ἀνάφθειρα and ἀστάθμητα should be similarly understood. I believe that a translation of these terms reflects one’s interpretation, but there is not a decisive translation which will support one interpretation to the exclusion of another. See also Ausland (372-5), who argues that this debate between subjective and objective is misguided.
novel interpretation by H.W. Ausland will be addressed shortly). The subjective or epistemological reading takes Pyrrho to mean that we, the perceivers, are such that we cannot differentiate, measure, or determine ‘things’ (τά πράγματα), and so our ignorance is the result of our own epistemological structure (e.g., our senses are not refined enough). This interpretation leaves room for reality to be determinate in itself. The objective or metaphysical interpretation understands Pyrrho to mean that things themselves are undifferentiated, unmeasurable and indeterminate, that is, the objective structure of reality is such that it is intrinsically unintelligible, or perhaps reality has no stable structure (a sort of Heraclitean or Protagorean view of the world).

I The Epistemological Interpretation

The epistemological interpretation attributes to Pyrrho a less extreme and hence more easily corroborated claim, but one which is not supported by the text. First of all, under this interpretation the thesis gives no answer to Pyrrho’s first question — how things are by nature — because it becomes a statement about our abilities rather than about ‘things’. It is true that ‘πράγμα’ can be as vague in Greek as ‘thing’ is in English and thus τά πράγματα could refer to facts about our perceptual capacities, but the passage does not read as well under this interpretation. In (2) τά πράγματα could refer to facts about human capacities, because there is no context to indicate what it means — it could refer to anything at this point. However, if Pyrrho was referring only to our perceptual abilities Aristocles could easily have phrased the question ‘how are we by nature?’ using πεφύκαμεν as in (1). The use of the general term τά πράγματα suggests that the referent is equally general, i.e., anything at all.

Secondly, the thesis is given as the reason why our perceptions and opinions are neither true nor false. This inference in (3) is valid if τά

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3 Ausland agrees, saying ‘The argument’s basic structure makes little sense if we assume that what is “naturally” true of “things” is that “we” stand at a disadvantage in our understanding of them’ (375). But, as we shall see, he also rejects the metaphysical interpretation.

4 διὰ τούτο μήτε τὰς αισθήσεις ἡμῶν μήτε τὰς δόξας ἀληθεύειν ἢ ψεύδοσθαι.
πράγματα refers to facts about the world (which would include, but not be limited to, facts about human abilities): if reality itself were indeterminate, in some sort of Heraclitean flux such that no particular x is either determinately F or determinately con-F, then there would be no fixed or stable facts for our perceptions and opinions to represent. This is why our perceptions and opinions would be neither true nor false. But the conclusion in (3) would not follow from the weaker, subjective premise that we are such that reality is indeterminate just to us; on this reading the argument would go: we cannot ever know whether one or another of our perceptions is true or false, therefore none of our perceptions is either true or false. But this is clearly invalid.

M.R. Stopper, in ‘Schizzi Pirroniani’, thinks the inference in (3) is invalid under the strong, metaphysical reading of the premise, but he gives no reason for this view, apparently thinking it is obvious. He says:

How does Timon’s remark about the senses connect with his remark about the διάφορα of τὰ πράγματα? The transmitted text is clear: since things are indifferent, for that reason (διὰ τούτο) our senses are unreliable. But that is a zany inference, as a little reflexion will show.... The inference should go the other way about, as it does in later scepticism. We should accept Zeller’s διὰ τό for διὰ τούτο. ⁵ (293, n.53)

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⁵ Stopper is referring to an emendation proposed by Zeller: where the manuscripts have διὰ τούτο Zeller would substitute διὰ τό, the effect of which is to reverse the order of the inference, making ‘things are indifferent, etc.’ the conclusion rather than the premise. Zeller gives no philological grounds for this emendation, but a referee for *Apeiron* has suggested to me that the received text requires a stop before διὰ τούτο, which is then left without a connective, which he considers to be improbably harsh. He thinks an emendation to something such as καὶ διὰ τούτο would be necessary, and finds Zeller’s emendation slightly preferable because the διὰ τούτο which begins (4) may have caught the scribe’s eye. However, this phenomenon, called ‘asyneton’, does occur occasionally; in fact, in Smyth’s *Greek Grammar* (sec. 2167) it is noted that the asyndetic sentence often expresses the result of or the reason for the preceding sentence. Therefore, I do not find it improbable that the original text of (3) lacked a connective, and I believe the text can stand as is. For a fuller critique of Zeller’s motivation see Ausland, 366-7 (readers should be cautioned that throughout his paper Ausland mistakenly refers to Stopper’s ‘Schizzi Pirroniani’ as authored by J. Barnes, e.g., 373, n.34; 412, n.133; 413, n.134).
It is not obvious to me, even after much reflexion, that this inference would be 'zany'; in fact, as I just argued, it seems quite plausible if we grant Pyrrho the premise. I shall get back to Stopper in a moment. For now I hope I have given some support for the metaphysical interpretation.

The epistemological interpretation is popular among scholars writing about Pyrrho, but I have not seen a persuasive argument for this view. For instance, in The Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics Zeller emends the text as Stopper noted, so as to reverse the inference in (3), and presents the epistemological version of Pyrrho's philosophy without argument. Regarding the question 'what is the nature of things?', Zeller says:

Pyrrho can only reply by saying that things are altogether inaccessible to knowledge, and that whatever property may be attributed to a thing, we may with equal justice predicate the opposite. In support of this statement Pyrrho appears to have argued that neither the senses nor reason furnish certain knowledge. (493)

How Zeller can say 'Pyrrho appears to have argued...', when this argument is the result of reversing Pyrrho's original reasoning, is beyond me. Drawing on later sources, such as Aenesidemus, Diogenes Laertius, and Sextus Empiricus, Zeller attributes views to Pyrrho which are not evidenced in the Aristocles text alone. Later skeptics, conscious of the charge of self-refutation, gave subjective rather than objective reasons for their suspension of judgment. Most scholars of ancient skepticism seem to assume that Pyrrho was a 'Pyrrhonian skeptic' just like Sextus or Aenesidemus; in fact they take it as a general principle that if Pyrrho seems to say something that conflicts with orthodox Pyrrhonism then he must be reinterpreted so as to evade such conflict. But I believe this principle should be at least questioned. The Aristocles text should be our primary evidence for Pyrrho's views, and if the text suggests views which are inconsistent with later Pyrrhonism then we must admit the possibility that Pyrrho was not really a Pyrrhonist in the same sense as Sextus.\(^6\)

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\(^6\) Cf. Plotinus, who seems to have thought of himself as a strict Platonist; if we had as little text of Plato as we do of Pyrrho we would be more inclined to believe that Plotinus was right, and we would have a very different view of Plato.
As noted above, Stopper follows Zeller's emendation, reversing the inference in (3), and yielding the same epistemological reading. Stopper summarizes his understanding of this text:

Pyrrho urged, no doubt on the basis of some of the arguments later collected by Aenesidemus, that "our perceptions and our beliefs are neither truthful nor liars." Then "how are things?" — They are un-assessable and undecided. (274-5)

The extent of Stopper's reasoning is that the inference in the transmitted text of (3) is 'zany'. But, again, I disagree: a straightforward metaphysical reading does yield a plausible inference. This plausibility undercuts Stopper's sole reason for changing the Greek. Surely emending a text should be the last resort, used only when the text makes no sense as it stands. We may disagree with Pyrrho's thesis taken as a metaphysical claim, but we should take him at his word. Annas and Barnes also follow Zeller's emendation in their translation in The Modes of Scepticism: 'Pyrrho shows that objects are equally indifferent and unfathomable and undeterminable because neither our senses nor our judgements are true or false' (11), but they give no justification for this translation, nor do they even acknowledge that they follow a seriously emended text.

In her translation of the Aristocles text in Greek Skepticism (17) Charlotte L. Stough rejects Zeller's emendment, but she agrees with his interpretation. She says:

The assertion that things are by nature "indeterminable" allows more than one interpretation. The predicate could be used descriptively, implying that the character of anything to which it is applied is indistinct or not sharply differentiated from anything else. That is, Pyrrho could be asserting that the world is really ("by nature") homogeneous, with the result that no components can be discriminated or distinguished one from another. It is not likely, however, that he intended this since his next statement is that our sense experiences and beliefs, in which we make such distinctions, are neither true nor false. Hence the predicate "indeterminable" is probably not meant to be descriptive of items in the world, but to say something about the relation between these entities and a knowing subject, namely, that the properties of objects, whatever they may be, cannot be discerned or discriminated. (18, my emphasis)

Stough's only argument against the metaphysical interpretation (she calls it 'descriptive') is to point out the inference in (3). Apparently she
thinks it makes better sense read epistemologically. But while that inference is invalid under the epistemological interpretation, it is plausible enough under the metaphysical interpretation to justify our acceptance of that reading. Zeller, Stopper, Annas and Barnes, and Stough are representative of the absence of a good argument for the epistemological interpretation of Pyrrho.

II The Metaphysical Interpretation

On the other hand, in their commentary on this text in The Hellenistic Philosophers Long and Sedley adopt the metaphysical reading:

...this cognitive incompetence [i.e., the human incapacity for knowledge] is not attributed, as in Democritus for instance (KRS 552-4), to a weakness in our faculties as such, but to "how things are by nature." The reason why "neither sensations nor opinions tell us truths or falsehoods" (F4) appears to be grounded in the "indifferent, unmeasurable and inarbitrary" nature of things, quite independently of ourselves. Pyrrho on this evidence denies access to truth or falsehood as a consequence of a claim that the world itself lacks any determinable character: either there are no facts, or if there are, they are not the sorts of things that are even in principle available to cognition. (I, 16)

Long is the primary author of the sections on Pyrrho (I, xiv), but Sedley independently endorses the metaphysical interpretation in his earlier article 'The Motivation of Greek Skepticism': 'Pyrrho took the quite different course of asserting a single dogmatic truth about the world, that it is in its own nature "undifferentiated, unmeasurable, and un-judgeable"' (14).

In 'On the Moral Origin of the Pyrrhonian Philosophy' H.W. Ausland, after criticizing the epistemological interpretation as noted above (n. 3), attempts to discredit this metaphysical reading as well. His intention is to clear the way for a third possibility: that Pyrrho's motivation is primarily practical and ethical, not epistemological or metaphysical. Addressing the metaphysical reading he says:

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7 My (3) in the Aristocles text.
The problem is no less severe for someone who holds that Pyrrho means to characterize things in terms entirely independent of our cognitive relation to them. Even if things could be ὑπερήφανοι independent of an ἐπιστήμη, the assertion that they are would be left wholly without philosophical grounds. Neither reading escapes the paradox posed by the way in which Timo introduces Pyrrho’s claim about our senses and opinions as if it was the consequence (διὸ τὸ πώς μή πειτίλε), rather than the basis, for Pyrrho’s claim about things. Whether we assume that Pyrrho based his skepticism on objective or subjective indifferentiability, as long as we assume that the claim about our senses and opinions makes reference to skeptical arguments against the reliability of our cognitive faculties, we are forced to understand the argument’s first consequence in reverse order from that which it occupies according to the received text. (375)

Ausland here rejects the metaphysical interpretation for two reasons. The first is that the assertion that things are indeterminate would be ‘wholly without philosophical grounds’, i.e., unjustified. This is precisely the problem I want to examine next: the justificatory status of Pyrrho’s thesis. Ausland too hastily assumes that this thesis would be unjustified, and concludes that Pyrrho could not, therefore, have meant it as a metaphysical claim. And second, Ausland objects that both epistemological and metaphysical interpretations must follow Zeller in reversing the inference in (3), a move which he has already criticized (see n.5 above). This, I believe, is false. Such a move is advantageous to proponents of the epistemological interpretation but the inference of the received text is plausible enough on the metaphysical reading. Thus Ausland’s criticism of the metaphysical interpretation is weak. But what of his alternative interpretation?

III Ausland’s Interpretation

Ausland believes that ‘Pyrrho is primarily concerned with ethical questions’ (390, n.78). He does not mean that Pyrrho is totally unconcerned with knowledge, or truth and falsehood, but rather that such issues are of secondary importance. Specifically, he understands what I am calling Pyrrho’s thesis to mean that things ‘are no more good than bad, that they cannot be discriminated by critical means, and that their equivalent claims cannot be decided even by appeal to some higher faculty’ (396-7). He presents the inference in my (3) as follows:
(i) Things are (a) equally indifferent [i.e., no more good than bad]; (b) undistinguishable as well as (c) unadjudicable; (ia) therefore neither our senses nor opinions tell the truth or lie. (406)

The problems with this interpretation are similar to those of the epistemological reading. First, the inference is invalid: the claim that ‘things are no more good than bad’ does not imply that our senses and opinions neither tell the truth nor lie. And second, under this reading Pyrrho’s thesis sounds more like a claim about us than about ‘how things are by nature’: Ausland assimilates Pyrrho’s ὀδύνηρα to the Stoics’ intermediates, i.e., things that are neither good nor bad (398-9); but this only claims that things have no value relative to us. Thus I do not think it is plausible to read Pyrrho’s thesis as an ethical statement. The most straightforward reading, which also preserves the validity of the inference in (3), is the metaphysical. Of course Ausland is right to stress Pyrrho’s ethical interests. The Aristotelian text makes it clear that the purpose of Pyrrho’s skepticism is to attain undisturbedness and happiness. But it seems more likely that claims of ethical indifference were grounded, for Pyrrho, on claims of metaphysical indeterminateness (I will come back to this point in section V).

IV The Question of Justification

Let us then suppose, as the text seems to indicate, that Pyrrho’s skepticism rests on an objective metaphysical thesis about the nature of reality. The obvious and crucial question is what the status of this thesis is, and how he might have justified it.

Pyrrho has two mutually exclusive and exhaustive options: his thesis falls either within or outside of the class of what cannot be known.⁸ Let us first suppose that his thesis falls outside the class of what cannot be known. It would then enjoy a priviledged status and Pyrrho would have to explain how this alone, of all claims, can be known. The options regarding the justification of this thesis are again twofold: the thesis is

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⁸ By ‘the class of what cannot be known’ I mean the class of propositions which Pyrrho would advise us not to affirm, those towards which we should be ‘unbelieving and uninclining and unshaken’. Pyrrho does not discuss ‘knowledge’ per se.
somehow self-evident or self-justifying, or it is the conclusion of an argument, whose premises must also be known. I can find no positive evidence that Pyrrho or Timon believed either alternative; and while I know of no one who attributes the former view to them, Long and Sedley apparently think they took the latter course. Noting that we have no reports of how Pyrrho supported his thesis about the indeterminacy of reality (I, 17), Long and Sedley speculate that if pressed for justification he would argue the following:

(a) If the world has a determinate nature, it will be truly or falsely describable by a definite theory.

(b) But all existing definite theories about the world conflict with one another in such a way that there is no reason to prefer one such theory to another.

(c) Nor is it possible to think of some other definite theory \( T^* \) which is immune to this absence of preference.

(d) Therefore there is no reason to think that the world is truly or falsely describable by a definite theory.

(e) But (d) contradicts (a).

(f) Therefore the world does not have a determinate nature. (II, 6)

The problem with attributing such an argument to Pyrrho is that it just gets him into more trouble: instead of one unjustifiable thesis, he is saddled with a number of unjustifiable premises, which must also fall outside the class of what cannot be known.\(^9\) In saying that these premises are ‘unjustifiable’, I mean that they are unjustifiable on the skeptic’s own terms. All a Pyrrhonian skeptic can legitimately affirm is how things appear to him — he certainly cannot affirm anything like premise (a) in Long and Sedley’s argument. Timon says, ‘That honey is sweet I do not affirm, but I agree that it appears so’ (Diogenes Laertius 9.105; Long and Sedley 1H). One might try suggesting that Long and Sedley’s premises are only descriptions of how things appear to Pyrrho and not statements of ‘fact’, but then the premises would be too weak to support the

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\(^9\) Also, (e) is inaccurate: the relationship between (a) and (d) is not that of contradiction.
conclusion. So if Pyrrho had an argument for the indeterminateness of reality, he would end up having to claim quite a bit of knowledge in order to support his skepticism.

In his earlier book, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, Long is less cautious in attributing arguments to Pyrrho. Noting that Pyrrho’s thesis is not argued for in the text in which it occurs, he says:

But Pyrrho’s own reasoning can be reconstructed with a fair degree of certainty from the fragments of Timon and from other Sceptic sources. Pyrrho is attacking all theories of knowledge which seek, as the Stoics and Epicureans sought, to show that certain perceptual experiences provide wholly accurate information about the real nature of (external) objects. The basis of his critique is that we cannot get at objects independently of sense-perception, and sense-perception provides no guarantee that we apprehend things as they really are. Objects in themselves are therefore not available to test our sense-perception. Sense-perception reveals ‘what appears’ to the percipient; but ‘what appears’ cannot be used as sound evidence from which to infer ‘what is.’ (81-2)

Long does not identify which fragments or sources he used to construct this argument. But it seems clear that Long’s argument does *not* support Pyrrho’s thesis about the indeterminateness of reality. Rather, the most it says is that reality is not accessible to us and we cannot use ‘what appears’ to gain access to ‘what is’. Pyrrho’s thesis is much stronger than any claim Long’s argument could support.\(^\text{10}\) In fact it seems obvious that

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\(^{10}\) Long’s argument may support Pyrrho’s thesis under the epistemological interpretation, but that interpretation is here rejected and Long and Sedley also explicitly reject it (II, 6). Primary authorship of the sections on Pyrrho in *The Hellenistic Philosophers* is claim by Long (I, xiv), so in his earlier book he is careless and/or inconsistent with his later view, or perhaps he changed his mind. Long’s translation of ὄνειρος, ἀληθινὸν, and ἀνεκπηρική into the modal terms ‘indistinguishable’, ‘unmeasurable’, and ‘indeterminable’, because, he says, ‘this interpretation suits the argument better’, along with his endorsement of Stough’s reasoning for this interpretation (Hellenistic Philosophy, 80, n.3), suggests that Long at least implicitly assumed the epistemological interpretation in his earlier work. Note that in his later translation (The Hellenistic Philosophers, I, 15) Long renders ὄνειρος descriptively as ‘indifferent’, retains his modal translations ‘unmeasurable’ and ‘indeterminable’, yet explicitly endorses the metaphysical interpretation of Pyrrho. So he must not think a modal translation is decisive in favor of the epistemological interpretation.
no set of premises acceptable to a skeptic could imply the indeterminate-
ness of reality. So if Pyrrho did argue for this thesis, I dare say there is no way he could have avoided self-refutation.

The alternative is that Pyrrho’s thesis is itself within the class of statements that cannot be known. This may at first appear plausible, because of its similarity to the self-effacing character of later skepticism. For instance, Photius says of Aenesidemus, the first-century B.C. reviver of Pyrrhonism, ‘in general the Pyrrhonist determines nothing, not even this, that nothing is determined. (We put it this way, he says, not having a way to express the thought.)’ (Bibliotheca 170a12-14; Long and Sedley 71C8). And Sextus says ‘the phrase “no more” is itself among the things about which it is said “no more” and for this reason cancels itself together with the other things. And we say the same thing about the other skeptical utterances’ (Pyrrhonae hypotyposes 1.14). More importantly, Sextus attributes to Metrodorus of Chios the view that ‘we know nothing, nor do we even know just this, that we know nothing’ (Adversus mathematicos 7.88; Long and Sedley 1D).11 Metrodorus and Anaxarchus were fourth-century B.C. skeptically inclined Democriteans, and the latter, according to Diogenes Laertius (9.61; Long and Sedley 1A1), was Pyrrho’s teacher. So might Pyrrho have shared this skeptical attitude towards his thesis about the indeterminateness of reality?

I think not, because Pyrrho’s thesis is too dogmatic an assertion to be qualified by ‘but I do not know this’, at least not without the result being an implicit contradiction. The above quotes of Aenesidemus, Sextus, and Metrodorus have generally the same force. In their cases the skeptical proviso qualifies a statement expressing skepticism; but in Pyrrho’s case it would qualify the apparently dogmatic claim ‘reality is indeterminate’, and thus the cases are not parallel. In Greek Scepticism: Anti-Realist Trends in Ancient Thought Leo Groarke suggests that when Pyrrho says that things are by nature indeterminate, etc., he really means that they appear to be indeterminate and not that they are in fact such (94-6).

11 Also Sextus Pyrrhoneae hypotyposes 1.197: ‘Regarding the phrase “I determine nothing” this is what we say. We hold that “to determine” is not simply to state a thing but to put forward something non-evident combined with assent. For in this sense, no doubt, it will be found that the Sceptic determines nothing, not even the very proposition “I determine nothing”; for this is not a dogmatic assumption, that is to say assent to something non-evident, but an expression indicative of our own mental condition.’ (R.G. Bury’s translation.)
Groarke has two reasons for this interpretation: it rescues Pyrrho from contradicting his skepticism, and it is consistent with later Pyrrhonism. He cites Sextus’ comment that \( \varepsilon \varepsilon \varepsilon \varepsilon \) can mean either ‘really exists’ (or ‘really is’) or just ‘appears’, but that the Pyrrhonians always use it in the latter sense (95; Adversus mathematicos 11.18-19; also Pyrrhoneae hypotyposes 1.198-99). However, Sextus’ description of orthodox Pyrrhonism is here of secondary importance; the reported words of Pyrrho and Timon are our primary evidence for their view. According to our key text the question ‘how are things by nature?’ is answered ‘things are equally undifferentiated, unmeasurable, and indeterminate.’ This \( \varepsilon \varepsilon \varepsilon \varepsilon \) certainly sounds like a straightforward predicative copula (of course ‘\( \varepsilon \varepsilon \varepsilon \varepsilon \)’ is understood in this line, it is not in the text; see n. 2 for the Greek text); and the ‘by nature’ would seem out of place if Pyrrho meant only that things appear to be indeterminate. Thus Pyrrho cannot escape inconsistency by the same means used by later skeptics. The justificatory status of Pyrrho’s thesis still needs an explanation.

E. Flintoff’s interpretation in ‘Pyrrho and India’ may be seen as a way to avoid the problem of justification. He argues that Pyrrho was greatly influenced by Indian ‘naked philosophers’ whom Pyrrho is said to have visited with Anaxarchus,12 and he sees Pyrrho as himself embracing a mysticism which makes the world completely indeterminate. Considering the evidence Flintoff presents, I can agree with his weak thesis that ‘there were many features within Indian thought that might have influenced Pyrrho in the formation of his “sceptical” philosophy’ (97), but I think he exaggerates these putative similarities and downplays the similarities between Pyrrho and his Greek predecessors and contemporaries.13 For instance, he refers to Pyrrho’s injunction to say about each thing ‘it no more is than is not, or it both is and is not, or it neither is nor is not’ as ‘that typically Indian mode of argument the so-called quadrilemma... a mode of thinking hitherto without precedent in Greek philosophical or indeed any other thinking’ (92). The quadrilemma is characteristic of Indian logic and used to formulate questions such as ‘whether the world is eternal or not, or both, or neither’ (93). First, we need not construe Pyrrho’s injunction as a quadrilemma at all. I read Pyrrho’s statement as

12 Diogenes Laertius 9.61; Long and Sedley 1A(1).
13 Groarke also comments on this exaggeration, 81, n.1.
a complex three-member disjunction in which ‘no more’ (οὐ μᾶλλον) governs only the first disjunct (i.e., we should say of each thing that it either <no more is than is not> or <it both is and is not> or <it neither is nor is not>). But this is not a quadrilemma. To be a quadrilemma the οὐ μᾶλλον would need to govern the entire three-member disjunction. And second, is this form of argument ‘unprecedented?’ Compare Republic V, where Plato says of the many beautiful things, the many just actions, and so on, ‘one cannot know for certain either that they are or that they are not, or that they are both or neither’ (479c3-5, Grube’s translation). Must Plato also have visited the naked philosophers in India? Furthermore, Pyrrho’s thesis that reality is indeterminate is given as the reason for further conclusions about our cognitive abilities. Such argumentation is not characteristic of mysticism. So even though mysticism may imply the indeterminateness of reality, Flintoff’s claim that Pyrrho was himself a mystic is not persuasive. And since Pyrrho gave us an argument we have the right to question his premises.

V. The Pragmatic Interpretation

My proposal, then, is that we interpret Pyrrho’s thesis as a ‘pragmatic’ hypothesis. I am using this term in a loose sense to refer to a thesis which is adopted because it gets us to a desired end or has explanatory power, but whose objective truth we are not committed to. Pyrrho’s end is obvious: ἀταραξία. His metaphysical thesis in the Aristotelian text is preceded by the claim that ‘one intending to be happy must look to these three things’, and the text concludes saying that one maintaining the skeptical attitude will achieve ἀταραξία. In fact, there is a pragmatic sort of attitude towards philosophy running throughout all the Hellenistic schools: the only reason for doing philosophy is to achieve ἀταραξία, which constitutes happiness. On my reading Pyrrho’s thesis is a metaphysical claim about reality rather than an epistemological claim about human cognitive abilities, which accounts for human ignorance, but its assertion does not carry with it the assumption that it is objectively true.

14 I would like to thank a referee from Apeiron for pointing this out to me.

15 Also cf. Aristotle Metaphysics 4.4, 1008a30ff.
The position here suggested for Pyrrho is similar to the attitude William James adopts towards the religious hypothesis in 'The Will To Believe'. James argues that there is a certain class of propositions which we are justified in believing despite the lack of evidence for them. Such propositions must be 'genuine', i.e., 'living', 'momentous', and 'forced'. For James believing or not believing the religious hypothesis is an option of this kind. A 'live' hypothesis is 'one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed' (187). Pyrrho's thesis was obviously living for him since he asserted it. An option is 'momentous' when some great and significant good is at stake (188). Religion is to James a momentous option because 'we are supposed to gain even now [not just after death], by our belief, and to lose by our nonbelief, a certain vital good' (204). For Pyrrho the indeterminateness of reality would be a momentous thesis because it was the foundation for the skepticism which led to undisturbedness, that greatest of goods in the Hellenistic period. A 'forced' option is a 'complete logical disjunction with no possibility of not choosing' (188). James saw religion as a forced option 'so far as that good goes' (204, the 'vital good' religion is supposed to confer), because the only way to attain this good is by believing; skepticism is not a third choice by means of which we evade the option, because skepticism as much as positive disbelief results in loss of this vital good. Similarly, Pyrrho's thesis is forced with respect to the good of undisturbedness and happiness, because he sees his skepticism as the only means of achieving ἀποταφανία (of course the Stoics and Epicureans would disagree).

In order to qualify as a candidate for justifiable faith James says that an option must be not only genuine in the sense of living, forced, and momentous, but it must also be undecidable by the intellect alone: 'The freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve' (207). In all other cases, when the option is not forced or momentous, or when it can be falsified or verified, James recommends that we suspend judgment until the evidence is in: 'Wherever there is no forced option, the dispassionately judicial intellect with no pet hypothesis... ought to be our ideal' (201). Religion, it seems,

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16 And it does so while simultaneously relieving us of the responsibility for our ignorance, thus removing a possible cause of anxiety: there is nothing we can do about reality being unintelligible, so we might as well stop struggling to know the unknowable and accept our ignorance.
is undecidable in this sense, but what about Pyrrho's thesis? Dogmatists such as the Epicureans would say that 'things are indeterminate' is falsifiable, because they thought that they had demonstrated the atomic structure of reality. But as we have seen, Pyrrho, as a skeptic, has no way of proving anything about things in themselves. So from Pyrrho's perspective his thesis would be undecidable. And as a genuine and undecidable option it would be, from James' pragmatic perspective, a candidate for justifiable faith. This faith or belief is justified and therefore rational in James' eyes because the pragmatic value of the consequences of believing constitutes a 'good reason' for that belief. If 'rational' means 'having good reasons', and reasons can be counted as good just for having good consequences, then perhaps Pyrrho's rationality can be preserved. Personally I think the second antecedent is false: reasons should be constituted by some sort of evidence, not by hope for some consequence; if we do not have evidence for a belief the honest thing to do is suspend judgment. But many philosophers find James' view persuasive and they may see Pyrrho's belief in the indeterminateness of reality as justified, at least from his own perspective.

Pyrrho surely had reasons for his thesis, just as James had reasons for his religious faith. But it seems to me another question whether Pyrrho thought those reasons to be true in the sense that premises would have to be true to support a conclusion. Pyrrho, whatever his reasons or motivations, believed reality to be indeterminate and hence unintelligible, but must have realized that he could not on his own principles know this to be the case. Like the Stoics and Epicureans, he assumed as his ultimate goal the state of ἀταραξία, but for Pyrrho this state seems to consist in freedom from the disturbance of conflicting or uncertain knowledge claims. So perhaps he affirmed his thesis as the pragmatic hypothesis needed to achieve ἀταραξία. Given that first premise his reasoning is cogent: if reality is indeterminate, there are no fixed facts for our senses or opinions to truly or falsely represent; hence we should not make affirmations (knowledge claims) about reality, but limit our affirmations to how things appear to us; but this state of non-affirmation — ἄφασια — is, or at least is a necessary condition for, ἀταραξία.

Further support for the pragmatic interpretation of Pyrrho's thesis can be found in a report of his ethical views. Sextus reports Timon as saying:

I will speak, as it appears to me to be, a word of truth, having a correct yardstick, namely that the nature of the divine and the good is at any time that from which life becomes most equable (ἰσοστασία) for a man. 17
This statement suggests that Pyrrho/Timon held a pragmatic theory of value. Pyrrho is not warranted in making dogmatic claims about what is good, but what appears good to him is whatever leads to a ‘most equable’ life.'18 'ISOĐΩΤΩC.' seems to describe a steady, unvarying life or person, and certainly suggests ἀταραξία. Since Pyrrho endorses as good whatever is instrumental in achieving ἀταραξία, I think he might have a similar attitude towards the thesis which is the very foundation of skeptical ἀταραξία. That is, Pyrrho’s metaphysical thesis in the Aristocles text and his theory of the good in this fragment both seem to be justified pragmatically.19

I should note that while I deny that Pyrrho argued for his thesis I do not view him as anti-rational or non-argumentative. We have reports of his dialectical competence: ‘In disputes he was looked down upon by no one, because he could both discourse at length and respond to questioning’ (D.L. 9.64). Pyrrho apparently could explicate and defend his views,

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17 ἢ γὰρ ἔχων ἔρεω, ὡς μοι καταφαίνεται εἶναι,
μάθων ἐλπιδείς ὁρθῶν ἔχων κανόνα,
ὡς ἢ τοῦ θείου τε φύσις καὶ τήτευξι ταῖς
ἐφ’ ὁμοίωσις γίνεται ἀνδρὶ βίος.
(Adversus mathematicos 11.20; Long and Sedley 2E) M.F. Burnyeat’s translation. I here follow his interpretation of the text, also accepted by Long and Sedley, which deletes the comma in line 3 and understands a predicative εἰσι. Vide Burnyeat; Long and Sedley, II, 11; and Supper, 270-1, for a radical alternative, on the basis of which he dismisses this text as sound evidence for Pyrrho’s philosophical views.

18 Someone defending the epistemological interpretation may try to argue that since here Timon explicitly says he is only reporting the truth ‘as it appears’ to him, when he says in the Aristocles text that ‘things are equally undifferentiated’ it is implicit that he also means this is only how it appears to him. But as I have argued repeatedly, the Aristocles text does not support this reading. We may wish that Pyrrho/Timon had been as undogmatic in the Aristocles text as they were in this fragment, but apparently they were not.

19 Michael Williams, in ‘Scepticism Without Theory’, argues persuasively that Sextus’ Pyrrhonism has a practical rather than theoretical foundation. He says of Sextus, his way of avoiding theoretical commitments is to stress the primacy of technique. Becoming a sceptic depends on acquiring an ability, not on proving or even assenting to a thesis’ (554). The requisite ability is ‘the method of opposition’, i.e., ‘the ability to meet any given argument or thesis with a countervailing argument or thesis of roughly equal force’ (ibid.). Pyrrho cannot be interpreted in this way, however, because he does make one theoretical commitment as the foundation of his skepticism. But perhaps later skeptics rejected this dogmatic element of Pyrrho’s philosophy while retaining his pragmatic orientation.
but that does not necessarily imply that he argued dogmatically (i.e., by making claims to knowledge) for his position. Timon praises Pyrrho in terms that clearly suggest the latter's indifference to questions of natural philosophy: 'You did not trouble to explore things such as these, what winds prevail over Greece, and from whence each thing arises and into what it passes' (ibid.; Long and Sedley 2C). Pyrrho was not interested in analyzing the structure of reality, but for some reason he felt justified in making an apparently dogmatic claim about it.

All scholars must admit that the evidence for any interpretation of Pyrrho is inconclusive. But what are the options (assuming the metaphysical interpretation)?

(a) Pyrrho's thesis is self-evident or self-justifying.

(b) It is the conclusion of an argument, the premises of which must then be justified.

(c) It is to be understood as itself one of the things we cannot know, in which case it is unjustified.

(d) It is a pragmatic hypothesis, affirmed for the sake of its consequences.

(e) Or, perhaps Pyrrho ultimately was inconsistent or unjustified.

References


