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## Mindfulness and Therapy: A Skeptical Approach

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### Introduction

Mindfulness-based approaches are the current mental health zeitgeist, shaped into therapeutic application through alignments with ‘third wave’ approaches such as mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). The fact that they are, at present, accepted more or less univocally raises several questions, one of which pertains to the potential elevation of these approaches to the realm of the undisputed. Opening a discussion on the origins of *skepticism* in meditation practice and the field of therapy, I will suggest that the complementary relationship between the ancient philosophies of Pyrrhonian skepticism (Empiricus, 1990) and the Buddhist Madhyamaka school (Nāgārjuna, 1995) might provide a practical challenge to what may easily turn, if passively accepted, into a form of dogmatism. I will argue that the above offer the parameters for the construction of a therapeutic alliance that shifts us from a behavioral understanding of the self towards one encouraging a greater embodiment of the lived experience of both therapist and client. Both philosophies encourage a way of life that embodies the suspension of one’s judgment and beliefs. This attitude potentially leads to freedom from mental conflict, or anxiety—an attitude that, as I will suggest, can be lacking in contemporary therapeutic applications of mindfulness-based approaches.

### Towards a Skeptical Approach to Psychotherapy

A skeptical approach to psychotherapy (Heaton, 1993, 1999) adheres to a discourse of constructive challenge of theory and world view. As such, it emphasizes expediency over doctrine. Its roots lie in Pyrrhonian skepticism, which takes its name from the Greek philosopher Pyrrho of Elis (360–270 BC). Pyrrho did not write anything and we rely chiefly

upon two main sources to provide us with an insight into his philosophy and life, informed, first, by the sketchy remnants of the writings of Timon of Philius, a contemporary of Pyrrho. Diogenes Laertius (2011) provides a biographical account of Pyrrho and insights into his philosophical attitude. Second, Sextus Empiricus, a philosopher, physician, and adherent of Pyrrhonian philosophical practices, writing in the latter part of the third century AD, provides a thorough presentation on the philosophy that informed his own skeptical attitude in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (1990).

Pyrrhonian philosophers were unique in the West in their attempts to differentiate the *non-evident* from the *evident* in human experience. They refused to develop beliefs about non-evident matters, for or against. For the Pyrrhonists, beliefs about things non-evident were inherently dogmatic as they could not be authenticated and therefore be accepted with any certainty. It was the ramifications of this lack of certainty, such as fear and anxiety, which was, according to the Pyrrhonists, the main source of human suffering (Kuzminski 2008). What Pyrrhonists questioned was not *what* appeared, but the judgments and beliefs we *hold* about appearances. We cannot claim to know *how* or *why* they appear. Consequently, rather than deny all claims, which would have been dogmatic, the Pyrrhonists advocated suspending judgment (*epoché*) about them. Once such judgments were suspended, they experienced a subsequent liberation from anxiety, at least relating to the uncertainty associated with the beliefs in question (ibid).

Pyrrhonian skeptics saw their philosophy as primarily therapeutic. Kuzminski describes Pyrrhonism, in its most basic terms, as “a therapeutic and liberating practice advocating no views” (2008: 2). It is a lifestyle (*agoge*) that leads to *ataraxia*, freedom from mental discord, or tranquility. As appearances are no longer limited by the beliefs typically held about them, they can now be valued for what they are—immediate, direct experiences unattached to suppositions or hypotheses. Annas and Barnes describe the skeptical position as one of “practical doubt” (1985: 9). Suspending judgment has an ameliorative outcome. However, Pyrrhonian skeptics emphasized that approaching *ataraxia* (tranquility) as something to be achieved or attained is a source of conflict in itself. It is not something to be strived for, but occurs inadvertently through the method of suspension of judgment. Sextus Empiricus used the following illustration:

The skeptic, in fact, had the same experience which is said to have befallen the painter Apelles. Once, they say, when he was painting a