

No More This Than That: Pyrrhonian Indeterminacy

[Abstract] In the terms of ancient epistemology, Pyrrho is a dogmatist, not a skeptic, simply on account of putting forward a metaphysical theory. His most contested claim is that things are indifferent, unmeasured, and indeterminate—or, on a competing reconstruction, that things are indifferntiable, unmeasurable, and indeterminable. This paper argues that Pyrrho’s position, which I call Pyrrhonian Indeterminacy, belongs to a rich tradition of revisionist metaphysics that includes ancient atomism, flux metaphysics, Plato’s analysis of becoming, and today’s discussions of indeterminacy and vagueness. This tradition, my argument continues, makes room for a kind of metaphysics that proceeds in epistemological terms. Pyrrho’s indeterminacy claim says that things are indeterminate insofar as they do not have features by reference to which we can determine them to be such-and-such. We should not waver or be inclined to see things one way or another—we should see things, and describe them, as “no more this than that.”

The sea looks grey to one person and white to another person.¹ The wind appears cold to one person and not cold to another person. Bears find insects tasty, humans often do not. Ordinary as they are, such phenomena strike a number of ancient philosophers as significant. The position I call Pyrrhonian Indeterminacy finds what I call phenomena of difference everywhere. And it offers a reply to the question of what the world must be like to account for them. Things are “no more this than that,” the proposal goes, or in other words, indeterminate.

I speak of Pyrrhonian Indeterminacy for two reasons. First, I ascribe the view that I reconstruct to Pyrrho, ancestor of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Second, “indeterminacy” can stand in for a range of notions that Pyrrho employs in order to express how things are. With this proposal, I situate Pyrrho in a rich philosophical tradition, which extends from atomism, flux metaphysics, and Plato’s analysis of becoming to today’s discussions about indeterminacy and vagueness.² I thereby reject four existing accounts of Pyrrho’s philosophy:

Cartoon Character Reading: Pyrrho is not a serious philosopher.

Epistemological Reading: Pyrrho holds that we cannot determine things.

Metaphysical Reading: Pyrrho holds that things are indeterminate.

¹ I’m grateful for discussion to participants of a Colloquium talk at Dalhousie University, Máté Veres’ seminar in Toronto, and the Research Group in Ancient Epistemology (remote), and for comments to Justin Clarke-Doane, Jens Haas, and Anthony Hejduk.

² Sextus takes the following approaches to be nearby to his skepticism: Heraclitean flux, Democritean atomism, Cyrenaicism, Protagorean relativism, Academic skepticism, medical empiricism, SE *PH* 1.210-41. Regarding today’s debates, cf. Pravato (2020), MacFarlane (2021).

Insufficient Evidence Reading: We cannot decide between the epistemological and metaphysical reading.³

On the first reading, Pyrrho is an eccentric figure whose views do not seem worthy of extended philosophical engagement.⁴ This view loses its pull, I argue, once we see how closely Pyrrho's ideas relate to sophisticated debates in Greek philosophy. The other three readings share a premise that I reject. They stipulate that the relevant kind of epistemology is purely epistemological and that the relevant kind of metaphysics is purely metaphysical. But Pyrrho advances his proposals in a context where these fields of inquiry do not work quite in the way in which we may think of them today. Rather, there is a tradition in metaphysics that proceeds in epistemological terms.⁵ Thus a fifth option emerges, which argues that the relevant kind of metaphysics is saturated with epistemology.

Pyrrhonian Indeterminacy: Pyrrho holds that things are indeterminate insofar as they do not have features by reference to which we can determine them to be such-and-such.

By defending a metaphysics steeped in epistemology, Pyrrho turns out not to be a skeptic. This should not surprise us. None of the approaches I reject views him as a skeptic either.⁶ One way or another, Pyrrho puts forward a philosophical view, thus counting, by the lights of later ancient skeptics, as a dogmatist.⁷

But Pyrrho is not only the name giver of Pyrrhonian skepticism. He takes himself to offer a route to happiness. The states of mind that adequately capture that things are indeterminate put us at ease. In this respect, Pyrrho resembles his Pyrrhonian successors,

³ Svavarsson (2010) distinguishes between a subjective (roughly, epistemological) and an objective (roughly, metaphysical) reading, defending the former. Svavarsson (2004) defends a hybrid between the Epistemological and the Metaphysical Readings. Bett (2000) and (2018) defends the Insufficient Evidence Reading; nevertheless, Bett has done much to make the Metaphysical Reading a genuine contender. Bett (1997) argues that Sextus Empiricus' *Against the Ethicist* is reflective of an earlier, metaphysical Pyrrhonism that might go back to Aenesidemus; here arguments don't lead to suspension of judgment, but to claims of the form "X does not exist." Cf. v. Fritz (1963) and Decleva Caizzi (1981) on relevant sources.

⁴ Cf. Barnes (1992). Bett (2000) takes Pyrrho seriously as a philosopher.

⁵ Cf. Vogt (2012), Moss (2021), and earlier Makin (1993).

⁶ The Epistemological Reading has been advertised as making sense of Pyrrho's role as ancestor of Pyrrhonian skepticism, which is, after all, an epistemological approach. But since Pyrrho is not a skeptic on either reading, this argument is not decisive.

⁷ Cf. Vogt (2015a).

who also see their philosophy as a route to tranquility.⁸ The modern tradition tends to assume that doubt is a state of unease. Contrary to that, viewing things as “no more this than that,” as Pyrrho proposes, is a way of attaining tranquility.⁹

In Section 1 I present the main texts upon which my proposal is based. In Sections 2 and 3 I reject the Cartoon Character, Epistemological, and Metaphysical Readings. In Section 4 I develop my own proposal, thereby rejecting also the Insufficient Evidence Reading. Sections 5 and 6 examine the normative upshots of Pyrrhonian Indeterminacy. By way of conclusion, Section 7 shows how my proposal meets additional constraints.

1. What are Things Like By Nature?

The core of Pyrrho’s views is reported by Aristocles, an Aristotle commentator. Before Aristocles turns to Pyrrho, he speaks in his own voice:

T1 It is above all necessary to investigate our own knowledge; for if we by our nature know nothing, then there is no need to inquire into other matters. There have also been some among the ancients who made this pronouncement, against whom Aristotle has argued. (T1-T3 = Aristocles, *On Philosophy* VIII, reported in Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 14.18.1-5 = DC 53, tr. Bett 2000)¹⁰

Next, Aristocles says that Pyrrho asks three questions: (1) What are things like by nature? (2) In what way ought we to be disposed toward them? (3) What will be the result for those who are so disposed?

T2 Pyrrho of Elis was also a powerful advocate of such a position; but he himself has left nothing in writing, while his disciple Timon says that whoever wants to be happy should consider these three questions. First, what things are

⁸ Cf. Striker (2010) on tranquility as a defining mark of the Pyrrhonian tradition.

⁹ The mental states that are front and center in Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism are suspension of assent to impressions and investigative mental states. Cf. Burnyeat (1982), Fine (2003), Vogt (2015b).

¹⁰ Though I shall talk as if I am reconstructing Pyrrho’s views, it is conceivable that de facto we are looking at an amalgam of Pyrrho’s and Timon’s outlook. It matters, however, that Timon’s report of Pyrrho’s views survives verbatim. Aristocles seems to report Pyrrho’s view in Timon’s words. I supply the Greek text for T2 and T3 (though not for T1), because here some specifics of my argument depend on close reading. T2: ἰσχυσε μὲν τοιαῦτα λέγων καὶ Πύρρων ὁ Ἡλείος· ἀλλ’ αὐτὸς μὲν οὐδὲν ἐν γραφῇ καταλέλοιπεν, ὃ δέ γε μαθητῆς αὐτοῦ Τίμων φησὶ δεῖν τὸν μέλλοντα εὐδαιμονήσῃν εἰς τρία ταῦτα βλέπειν· πρῶτον μὲν, ὅποια πέφυκε τὰ πράγματα· δεύτερον δέ, τίνα χρὴ τρόπον ἡμᾶς πρὸς αὐτὰ διακείσθαι· τελευταῖον δέ, τί περιέσται τοῖς οὕτως ἔχουσι.

like by their nature; second, in what way we should be disposed towards these things, and lastly, what will be the result for those who are so disposed.

Then Aristocles reports how Pyrrho responds to the three questions in sequence. According to Timon, she says that Pyrrho declared the following:

T3 [a] things (*pragmata*) are equally indifferent and unmeasured and indeterminate (*ep' isês adiaphora kai astathmêta kai anepikrita*). [b] For this reason neither our perceptions (*aisthêseis*) nor our opinions (*doxas*) tell the truth or lie. [c] For this reason, then, we should not trust them, [d] but should be without opinions and without inclinations and without wavering, [e] saying about each single thing that it no more is than is not or both is and is not or neither is and is not. [f] The result will be ... first speechlessness (*aphasia*) and [g] then freedom from worry (*ataraxia*). (division into sections KMV)¹¹

My reconstruction will move through the components T3[a] to [g]. Much hangs on [a], the enigmatic claim that things are indifferent and unmeasured and indeterminate. Before I turn to this, here are two considerations based on T1 and T2 that I take to supply interpretive constraints. First, a plausible reconstruction should make sense of the fact that Aristocles places Pyrrho's views in the context of debates about human knowledge. Call this the Knowledge Constraint. Second, a plausible interpretation must meet what I call the Happiness Constraint. It must make sense of the fact that Pyrrho advertises his philosophy as making us happy.

A plausible reconstruction should also be cognizant of another text, Diogenes Laertius' report about Pyrrho and his successors (DL 9.61-116). Call this, third, the Diogenes Constraint. The reception of Diogenes' report is still shaped by a landmark paper by Jonathan Barnes. Barnes (1992) takes §§61-73 to be concerned with Pyrrho's life. §§74-108, he proposes, is about skepticism, a view that Barnes describes as philosophically exciting. Given the choice between biography and "titillating" philosophy, Barnes opts for the latter and sets aside §§61-73. §§74-108, however, often do not distinguish between Pyrrho and other early Pyrrhonians. In effect, by setting aside the early sections of DL 9, one greatly diminishes the role of Diogenes' report for the reconstruction of Pyrrho's philosophy. And one misses some exciting metaphysics contained in the early sections.

¹¹ T3: τὰ μὲν οὖν πράγματα φησιν αὐτὸν ἀποφαίνειν ἐπ' ἴσης ἀδιάφορα καὶ ἀστάθμητα καὶ ἀνεπίκριτα, διὰ τοῦτο μήτε τὰς αἰσθήσεις ἡμῶν μήτε τὰς δόξας ἀληθεύειν ἢ ψεύδεσθαι. διὰ τοῦτο οὖν μηδὲ πιστεύειν αὐταῖς δεῖν, ἀλλ' ἀδοξάστους καὶ ἀκλινεῖς καὶ ἀκραδάντους εἶναι, περὶ ἐνὸς ἐκάστου λέγοντας ὅτι οὐ μᾶλλον ἔστιν ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν ἢ καὶ ἔστι καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἢ οὔτε ἔστιν οὔτε οὐκ ἔστιν. τοῖς μέντοι γε διακειμένοις οὕτω περιέσεσθαι Τίμων φησὶ πρῶτον μὲν ἀφασίαν, ἔπειτα δ' ἀταραξίαν, Αἰνησίδημος δ' ἡδονήν.

§61, the opening paragraph of Diogenes' report, summarizes Pyrrho's philosophy. Bett (2018) considers the passage a reason to opt for the fourth reading I mentioned: the question of whether Pyrrho's view is epistemological or metaphysical seems undecidable.

T4 [i] Because of this background, Pyrrho appears to have practiced philosophy in the noblest fashion, introducing (as Ascanius of Abdera says) the approach of non-cognition and suspending judgment. [ii] Pyrrho, you see, used to claim that nothing is fine or shameful, or just or unjust, and that similarly—in the case of all things—nothing is in truth (this or that) (*mêden einai têi alêtheiai*), but that men do all things by custom and habit. For, he claimed, each thing is no more this than that. (DL 9.61, tr. Scharffenberger and Vogt, 2015)¹²

[ii], the claim that each thing is “no more this than that,” is presented as elucidation of [i], which describes Pyrrho as the philosopher who defended “non-cognition” (more on this notion in Section 7) and suspension of judgment. That is, [ii], a metaphysical position, seems to be presented as elucidation of [i], an epistemological stance. Bett (2018) argues that the report is confused. It is neither here nor there with respect to the question of whether Pyrrho's position is epistemological or metaphysical and in effect supports the fourth interpretive hypothesis I mentioned, according to which we cannot decide between the two readings. But given that Diogenes' report about Pyrrho and Pyrrhonism is on the whole nuanced, it would be preferable if T4 could be made sense of.

Add to this that T4 is not the only dimension of Diogenes' report that deserves attention. §§67-73 contain references to thinkers whom Pyrrho invokes. These references are by no means focused on epistemology. For example, Zeno of Elea is cited as doing away with movement (9.72). The atomist Democritus is said to toss our qualities like hot and cold (9.72). Homer is cited with views on human life, thought, and language that counteract our self-conception as rational agents (9.67 and 73). It is not my aim to reconstruct the specifics of these references.¹³ I only take away a general upshot. The views Pyrrho seems to have cited support the hypothesis that Pyrrho is interested in revisionist metaphysics as well as revisionist ideas about human thought and language.

2. Phenomena of Difference

According to Pyrrho, things are equally indifferent and unmeasured and indeterminate (T3[a]). To get clear about these terms, it is helpful to start with examples. By way of introduction I spoke of “phenomena of difference.” Phenomena of difference play a prominent role in later Pyrrhonian philosophy and earlier in atomism, the approach of

¹² Throughout the paper, quotes from DL 9.61-116 are rendered in Scharffenberger's and Vogt's translation.

¹³ Warren (2015), Vogt (2015).

Pyrrho's teacher Anaxarchus, a skeptically inclined atomist of the Democritean school.¹⁴ We have thus every reason to believe that such phenomena are Pyrrho's starting point.

The so-called Ten Modes or Modes of Aenesidemus, which Sextus integrates into his account of Pyrrhonian skepticism, offer myriad examples: things seem different to different animals, to different persons, to the same person in different circumstances, depending on different comparanda, and so on (PH 1.36-163). Some examples can seem ridiculous, and some fail to be credible. For example, a man traversed the desert without drinking, which stands in contrast to the common human need to drink (PH 1.84).

A more general feature of the examples is that not clear *why* they should be philosophically challenging. For example, few people consider the fact that bears like to eat insects that humans tend not to enjoy (PH 1.57) an invitation to engage in revisionist metaphysics. Similarly, few people are puzzled by the observation that different animals avoid different things: elephants avoid rams, tigers the noise of drums, and so on (PH 1.58). Some of the examples may even prompt one to think "how could it be otherwise?" For example, things appear differently to different senses, say, honey appears pleasant to the tongue and unpleasant for the eyes (PH 1.92).

In citing these phenomena, I am using Sextus as a source. His own response to phenomena of difference is skeptical. Setting aside disputes about nuances, this response takes the following form.¹⁵ Things appear dissimilar to different animals, persons, the same person under different circumstances, and so on.¹⁶ Hence we can say how they appear to us, but we cannot say how they really are. On that, we suspend judgment (for example, PH 1.59). The skeptic has the ability to put appearances into opposition (PH 1.8), an activity that Sextus describes as ongoing inquiry (PH 1.1-3).

But Pyrrho's philosophy is not skeptical in Sextus' sense; it does not involve continued inquiry by setting appearances in opposition. If his interest in phenomena of difference is not simply a matter of confusion, it must play another role. The question that needs to be asked, in my view, is *why* one might find phenomena of difference metaphysically puzzling. Here Plato's *Theaetetus* proves helpful. This text can be "mined" for examples relevant to Pyrrhonism because of its resonances with atomism and its in-depth analysis of Heraclitean flux and Protagorean relativism. Sextus considers these views cousins of

¹⁴ Bett (2000, 160-163), Hankinson (1995, 54-55). We have reason to assume that atomism was widely debated: Plato and Aristotle engage in detail with atomism. Pyrrho is a near-contemporary of Epicurus, a leading atomist.

¹⁵ Cf. Palmer (2000), Striker (2001), Perin (2006), Morison (2011), Vogt (2012, ch. 5), Olfert (2015).

¹⁶ Scholarship on Sextus tends not to take these phenomena seriously. Prompted largely by Striker (2001), a number of scholars have argued that Sextus' "inquiries" — which invoke such phenomena as conduits to suspension of judgment — fail to be genuine.

Pyrrhonism, though he rejects all of them as dogmatic (PH 1.210-41). Plausibly, this is the family of views which Pyrrho grew up with.

In the early stages of discussing knowledge in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates introduces the Cold Wind Example. The same wind is blowing. One of us feels cold, the other doesn't (*Theaetetus* 152b). Though the example is offered to examine a proposal that Plato rejects—that knowledge is perception (151e), a view that Plato identifies with Protagorean relativism (152a)—Plato takes the example extraordinarily seriously. We need to ask how the world is such that phenomena like the Cold Wind Example occur.

The Cold Wind Example is formulated in terms of perceptions and appearances. The wind *appears* cold to the person (152b). But if the wind is cold for one person and not cold for another person, there cannot be a world of shared and stable objects that both refer to (152b-c). The world must be in flux. We cannot say correctly that anything ever is such and such; instead, it always becomes (152c-153d).¹⁷ For the metaphysics of flux to hold, perception must be rethought (153d-160e). A number of further examples are introduced. One case goes back to the atomist Democritus: the sea looks white to one and grey to another cognizer (156d-e).¹⁸ Things also taste differently depending on conditions that cognizers may be in. The wine tastes sweet to healthy Socrates and bitter to sick Socrates (159c-e). Presumably, we like what is sweet and dislike what is bitter, and we go after what we like. Thus “sweet” and “bitter” flag that perceptual properties are related to affective properties, say, desirable and to-be-avoided. The scope of the present analysis, Plato says, includes sight, hearing, smelling, feeling cold and feeling hot, pleasures and pains, desires and fears, and more (156b4-7).

To account for perception in a world of flux, Plato entertains a theory according to which each perception is “of” a momentary product, generated by the interaction between perceiver and a world in motion.¹⁹ That is, when one person freezes in the wind and the other does not, it is not the case that both perceive a shared object differently. Rather, what is perceived is constituted in a given act of perception. What seemed to be a world with beaches, people, and so on, now appears to be a world without stable objects. No two speakers, for example, who say “the wind” refer to the same thing.

¹⁷ Socrates invokes Homer—with whom Pyrrho aligns himself philosophically according to the report in DL—as a proponent of flux theory (152e).

¹⁸ Rudolph (2020). Another kind of case asks how something comes to have a different property even though itself does not change. If we put four dice next to them, six dice have the properties more and 1.5 times as many; if we set twelve dice next to them, the six dice have the properties less and half as many (*Theaetetus* 154c). Similarly, Socrates does not grow or shrink; but he is now taller than Theaetetus, but will be smaller than Theaetetus within a year, once the latter has grown up (*Theaetetus* 155b). The analysis of these cases would lead too far afield for present purposes.

¹⁹ McDowell (1973), Burnyeat (1990), Michael Frede (1999), Vogt (2012).

In a preliminary summary, Socrates says that there is nothing “which in itself is just one thing; all things become relatively to something.” (157a-b) If this is how the world is, we need revisionist linguistic norms: the verb “to be” must be abolished (157b-c). To say of something that “it is” predicates stability which is not there. This is a far-reaching proposal. Many of our utterances say that something is so-and-so. If we cannot use “is” or “be,” we need to revise our linguistic practices from the ground up. Plato uses a term that, before him, atomists employed.²⁰ What we ordinarily call an act of perception is “*no more perception than not*.” (182d-e) If a metaphysics of flux holds, we cannot ascribe any properties to anything. As Plato puts this, “thus” and “not thus” cannot be used if things are in motion as the Heracliteans have it (183b).²¹

Plato’s analysis in the *Theaetetus* sheds light on Pyrrho’s project in two ways. First, it illustrates the sense in which phenomena of difference can be considered genuine philosophical challenges, namely, insofar as they call into question whether there are stable perceptual entities with stable perceptual features. Plato’s analysis of perception resonates with atomism. According to atomism, the world consists of atoms moving through the void, interacting with cognizers and their sense perceptual activities, which are themselves to be explained in terms of atomic movement. At one end of the spectrum of atomist views—sometimes called “skeptical”—this is taken to mean that perception is not, say, “of” a tower, but of an atomic image traveling toward a cognizer.²² Pyrrho neither defends atomism, nor does he endorse Plato’s analysis. But given that Anaxarchus, Pyrrho’s teacher, is thought to be a “skeptical” atomist, it seems safe to assume that he is acquainted with these debates. Second, Plato provides a blueprint for the order of inquiry found in Pyrrho. Phenomena of difference motivate a revisionist metaphysics and revised practices of talking. Jointly, these two upshots provide a starting point for reconstructing Pyrrho’s views. By locating Pyrrho in a complex philosophical debate, they dispel the Cartoon Character Reading.

3. Eliminating Purely Epistemological and Metaphysical Readings

²⁰ De Lacy (1958), Makin (1993), Gregory (2013),

²¹ *Timaeus* 52d-61c contains similar considerations regarding the way in which the elements change into each other. Given this change, we cannot correctly call fire fire and water water. Talk in terms of “this”/ “that” (τοῦτο) implies that there is something stable (49d-e). We should revise our linguistic conventions, and instead speak in terms of “what is such” (τὸ τοιοῦτον) (49d-50a). Cf. Johansen (2009, ch. 6), Harte (2010), and earlier Gill (1987), who offers a comparison with relevant passages in the *Theaetetus*. Cf. also *Protagoras* 339b-345c, where Plato entertains another radical linguistic revision, namely that, given that human beings cannot attain stable virtue, we should only speak of someone “becoming” virtuous; assertions to the effect that someone “is” virtuous misrepresent the metaphysics of the sphere of human life.

²² O’Keefe (MS), Frede (1999).

Assuming that the Cartoon Character Reading is eliminated, turn to the two main contenders for a compelling reconstruction: scholars take it that Pyrrho's position is either epistemological or metaphysical. This premise looks implausible, I submit, once we consider the relevant notions of epistemology and metaphysics. The Epistemological and Metaphysical Readings as they are commonly understood assume that the former would be purely epistemological and the latter purely metaphysical. But this is an ill fit for the way these lines of inquiry are treated in the relevant tradition.

The Epistemological Reading takes Pyrrho to say that we cannot differentiate, measure, and determine things. It thereby locates indeterminacy *solely* in our epistemic failure to determine how things are. This is usefully compared to epistemicism, a view in today's discussions of vagueness that locates vagueness solely in our failure to discern cut-offs. By saying that only our epistemic failure is to be blamed for vagueness, it stipulates that in reality, there are precise cut-offs. This is how the Epistemological Reading works: it situates indeterminacy solely in our epistemic failure, and in effect comes with a substantive metaphysical view, namely that things *are* determinate. But if this is what the Epistemological Reading says, it is not a contender. A wide range of evidence on Pyrrho agrees in ascribing a view about the nature of things to him. "How are things by nature?" is the first question Pyrrho takes himself to address. Nevertheless, a reading that is purely metaphysical is not an option either. Pyrrho clearly speaks about doxastic attitudes and norms. This is why the fourth view, according to which we cannot decide between the Epistemological or the Metaphysical Reading, is a contender.

This stalemate seems unnecessary if Pyrrho is placed in the tradition I introduced, the tradition—including early atomism and Plato—that explores phenomena of difference. This tradition is familiar with a kind of metaphysics that is saturated with epistemology. The best-known discussion of this kind of epistemology is Plato's *Republic* V-VII, where Plato characterizes Forms as intelligible (*gnôston*, *noêton*), and particulars as opinable (*doxaston*) as well as (using sight as representative of sense perception in general) visible (*horaton*).²³ These terms function not only as adjectives, but also as nouns. In the plural, one can speak of intelligibles (*nooumena*) and opinables (*doxasta*) and visibles (*horômena*). If one were to ask whether the proposals Plato discusses in these terms should count as epistemology or as metaphysics, the obvious answer would be "both."

The intelligible can be contrasted with the unintelligible. For example, in *Phaedo* 80b soul and body are contrasted by saying that the former is akin to what is intelligible, while the latter is akin to what is unintelligible. Comparable notions are also used by Pyrrho's near-contemporary and atomist Epicurus. Epicurus distinguishes between *dêla*

²³ Cf. Moss (2021), Vogt (2012).

and *adêla*.²⁴ There are things which are evident to us, literally translated, the “evidents,” and others that are concealed or non-evident to us, literally, the “non-evidents.”

Thus there are terms, employed in the relevant contexts of discussion, which cannot be classified as purely epistemological or purely metaphysical. They pick out entities by reference to epistemological notions. If Pyrrho’s terms “indifferent,” “unmeasured,” and “indeterminate,” function similarly, there is an additional interpretive option. Pyrrho’s view need not be either epistemological or metaphysical or a confused mix of both. Rather, it can be a combination of both that is philosophically precise. This prepares the ground for my reconstruction of Pyrrho’s claim that things are equally *adiaphora kai astathmêta kai anepikrita*.

4. Pyrrhonian Indeterminacy

When a philosopher employs several predicates to characterize something, it is conceivable that each predicate makes a distinctive contribution. In the present instance, this could mean that each term—*adiaphora*, *astathmêta*, and *anepikrita*—picks out a specific dimension of how things are. The sequence of three predicates could mean that some things are *adiaphora*, others *astathmêta*, and others *anepikrita*. Both of these readings, however, go against the core of Pyrrho’s indeterminacy claim. If the terms mean what I take them to mean, it is precisely not the case that there are three discernible dimensions of how things are, and it is also not the case that things divide up into classes with distinctive features.

Alternatively, the predicates may work cumulatively. This option is plausible in contexts where an idea almost eludes linguistic expression. In the context of the examples cited earlier, Plato emphasizes the near-impossibility of devising language that is adequate to a world in which phenomena of difference are pervasive. On this cumulative reading, Pyrrho offers three terms that, jointly, characterize how things are. They work together and thus apply “equally” to things.

Adiaphora: With respect to persons, *adiaphoron* means that someone is undistinguished. Something can also be *adiaphoron* to sense perception, not differing in a perceptible fashion.²⁵ Note that it is not the case that undifferentiated things have no features at all.

²⁴ Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus* 39-40 = LS 5A, Lucretius 1.419-44 = LS 5B, SE M 7.211-16 = LS 18A.

²⁵ Cf. LSJ translates ἄ. πρὸς αἰσθησιν as “not differing sensibly.”

Consider the case of someone being “undistinguished.” Presumably, the person has some features, just not such that they mark her as different from others.²⁶

This dimension of the ordinary term seems to be preserved in Pyrrho’s usage. Pyrrho’s question “what are things like by nature?” employs a distinctively non-theoretical term: *pragmata*, which I translate as “things.” A few lines later, in T3, Pyrrho speaks about each “single” thing. I take this to indicate that “things” should not be understood along the lines of “facts.” Pyrrho is not asking about the nature of facts; his position is not about whether facts about the world are determinate or indeterminate. He is asking about things in the quite ordinary sense in which some object in the world is a thing. By adding “by nature,” Pyrrho does not seem to stipulate a technical notion, as if things had natures. He seems to ask in a pedestrian fashion what things are really like. Thus Pyrrho does not stipulate that there is no world for us to refer to.²⁷ Rather, it seems that there is something (“things”), but something undifferentiated.

If Pyrrho appeals to ordinary uses of *adiaphoron*, he says that things do not have features that permit us to describe them as being a certain way. Thus *adiaphoron* fits the model I identified as a way out of the stalemate between a purely epistemological and a purely metaphysical reading. The term characterizes how things are by invoking epistemic notions. Things are undifferentiated and therefore undifferentiable. This view is primarily metaphysical because it characterizes how things are. It is not primarily epistemological insofar as it does not pick out a failure or cognitive weakness of ours. Our cognitive response is entirely adequate to how things are: given that things are undifferentiated, we cannot differentiate them.

Though “undifferentiated” would be a fine translation for Pyrrho’s use of *adiaphora*, I prefer “indifferent,” because it captures a dimension that the other two terms express as well: to say that things are indifferent is not to say that *we* are indifferent with respect to them; rather, things themselves are indifferent. This seems somewhat mysterious. But, I submit, the idea comes into focus cumulatively: the other terms too ascribe some kind of undecidedness to things.²⁸

Astathmêta: Literally, *astathmêta* are things that are unstable or unsteady. Paradigmatic uses display the distinct mix of metaphysics and epistemology that I also ascribed to

²⁶ This is related to how the Stoics think we ordinarily talk of *adiaphora*. In their example, a person may have an odd or an even number of hairs. The difference between these two states of affairs doesn’t register with her and it does not pertain to any of her choices (DL 7.101-5).

²⁷ I here depart from Svavarsson (2015), who ascribes a “nihilist attitude toward reality” to Pyrrho.

²⁸ A similar line of thought figures in early atomism with respect to indifference between alternatives. For example, there is no more reason for atoms to be one size or shape than another; hence there must be infinite variety of atomic sizes and shapes. Makin (1993).

adiaphora. For example, the term is used in talk about the uncertainty of the future. Here one doesn't refer exclusively to the future being contingent, nor does one exclusively refer to our inability to predict it. One talks about both: insofar as the future is contingent, we are unable to predict it. *Astathmêta* can also mean "not subject to being placed on a balance" and thereby "unmeasurable."²⁹

"Unstable" and "unsteady" convey an idea that "unmeasurable" does not express: movement. By themselves, "unstable" or "unsteady" sound exclusively metaphysical, while by itself "unmeasurable" permits an exclusively epistemic reading. My translation "unmeasured" is intended as a middle road. It aims to capture the idea that things do not come in measured units or delineations. They are unmeasurable, but not because we fail as measurers. They are as it were wavering, and thus not apt to be measured.

Anepikrita: *Anepikrita* means indeterminate or undecided. In the light of everything considered so far, I take it that things are indeterminate insofar as they do not have features by reference to which we could determine them to be such-and-such. Given the combination with "unstable," Pyrrho may embrace the association of movement that "undecided" can exhibit, as when one speaks of "undecided weather." In this sense, undecided things are ones that, on account of their wavering, do not have the stability that would be needed for them to be such-and-such.

This reconstruction of the claim that "things are equally indifferent and unmeasured and indeterminate" achieves what none of the other readings does. It recognizes that Pyrrho's project is fundamentally metaphysical, and yet accommodates its epistemological dimensions.

5. Sensation, Opinion, and Norms of Abstention

Consider next the transition between Pyrrho's replies to (1) and (2):

²⁹ Cf. Bett (2018).

T3 [b] “For this reason” [because of things being *adiaphora kai astathmêta kai anepikrita*] “neither our perceptions nor our opinions tell the truth or lie.”³⁰

Our perceptions and opinions do not convey the truth about the world. But they also don’t lie. This means, I propose, that they are not truth-apt. They neither capture nor fail to capture some determinate reality in the world, because there is no such determinate reality. Call this view Neither True Nor False. To appreciate Neither True Nor False, compare it to Deception, a familiar view which says that appearances are deceiving. Deception is a cousin of epistemicism; it identifies our cognitive capacities as the culprit for the phenomenon it aims to explain. Deception involves two premises. First, perceptions and opinions are typically false or misleading. Second, there is a determinate way the world is, but appearances deceive us about it. Neither True Nor False rejects both of these premises. For there to be deception, there needs to be a fact of the matter, a determinate reality about which we could be deceived and for Pyrrho, there isn’t.

Here, then, are the negative normative upshots of Pyrrho’s view:

T3 [c] For this reason, then, we should not trust them, [d] but should be without opinions and without inclinations and without wavering, ...

Pyrrho either says that we should not trust our perceptions and opinions; or he says that we should not trust our perceptions. Insofar as he just said that neither are truth-apt, it seems likely that his claim refers to both, perceptions and opinions. Nevertheless, Pyrrho stipulates a distinction between sensation and opinion. While we should live without opinion, he does not say that we should live without sense perception.

At first glance, one may think that this is because the former is possible and the latter is not: we can abstain from forming opinions, but we cannot make ourselves have no sense perceptions. However, it is by no means a given that the human mind can function without opinion. Perhaps we often form opinions in quasi-automatic or passive ways. Perhaps some opinions are acquired by growing up in a given environment, and so on. That is, the norm to live without opinion is extraordinarily demanding. It asks us to halt a fundamental process in the mind. If this is how we see the norm to live without *doxa*, it is

³⁰ The translation of [b] is contested. Some scholars have argued that “*dia touto*,” here translated as “for this reason,” must be amended to “*dia to*.” This construal is thought to support the Epistemological Reading of Pyrrho’s view. Namely, it seems to require a translation along the following lines: because neither our perceptions nor our opinions tell the truth or lie, things are *adiaphora kai astathmêta kai anepikrita*. I reject this reading for two reasons. First, the “*dia to*” reading is taken to support the Epistemological Reading in the epistemicist sense. But we have seen that this framework is an ill fit for the type of notions that Pyrrho employs. Second, after intense debate, the philological dispute about the manuscript is undecided. But Bett (2018) argues convincingly that, whether or not the amendment is needed, [b] confirms that Pyrrho’s proposal is fundamentally metaphysical; that is, even if we read “*dia to*,” we need not construe the text as if it supported the Epistemological Reading. For present purposes, this is all we need.

conceivable that there should also be a norm to live without sense perception. For example, the proem of Parmenides' poem contains the idea that one must reach a state of mind comparable to pitch-dark night. Only when sensation is annihilated can we turn our minds to intelligible objects.³¹

But Pyrrho seems to assume that we *have* sense perceptions. Norms relate to how we deal with and respond to them. We should be without opinions, inclinations, and wavering. Given the way the text continues, opinions, inclinations, and waverings seem to be a cluster: these are three doxastic responses to sense perception. An opinion, I stipulated so far, is the acceptance of something being the way it looks (or sounds, smells, and so on). But recall that, according to Pyrrho, the domain of sense perception is characterized by phenomena of difference. While the sea may look white to me, I am aware that a moment ago it looked grey and perhaps I am also aware that it looks purple to my companion. Perhaps I even consider it an open question whether my companion and I refer to same thing when we each say "the sea," along the lines of the idea that perceivers refer to products of the interaction between their perceptual activity and moving constituents of the world. In effect, I may stop short of forming an opinion. But this restraint is not yet sufficient.

To be inclined to accept that, say, the sea is white, is already too much, given the way things are. The same applies to wavering. I should not allow myself to be pulled toward a momentary perception, and then toward another one, going back and forth between being inclined to accept one or the other. Inclination and wavering are just as inadequate as opinion. All three doxastic attitudes proceed as if the world was one determinate way, such that it makes sense to accept that it is a given way, or to be inclined to do so, or to waver between several such positions.

Assuming that phenomena of difference are pervasive, every given state of mind is like a freeze-frame: the world looks some specific way to a specific cognizer at a given time, under given circumstances, and so on. If we were to assent to such representations as true, we would be wrong about the world. The world is neither as it looks (sounds, etc.) in *this* freeze frame, nor as it looks (sounds, etc.) in some other freeze frame. We cannot perceive the world as it is, namely, indeterminate. But we can infer from phenomena of difference that the world is indeterminate. The appropriate mental states and linguistic attitudes aim to capture this insight. In a technical expression, the recommended state of mind captures that things are *ou mallon*—no more this than that.

6. No More This Than That

Here is the positive normative upshot of Pyrrho's view:

³¹ Primavesi (2013).

T3 [e] saying about each single thing that it no more is than is not or both is and is not or neither is nor is not. [f] The result will be ... first speechlessness (*aphasia*)

What we should “say” about each single thing is, presumably, what we should *think and say* about it. To unpack [e], we need to stipulate two assumptions. First, “is” is used in the predicative sense, where “is” means “is F,” rather than in an existential sense. Pyrrho is not concerned with whether there are things, but with *how* things are by nature.

Second, the three formulations offer alternative ways of speaking. This provides us with the following three modes of thought and speech, assuming that X is some thing about which we think and speak:

- (A) X is no more F than not-F.
- (B) X is both F and not-F.
- (C) X is neither F nor not-F.

Consider an example.

- (A) The wind is no more cold than not-cold.
- (B) The wind is both cold and not-cold.
- (C) The wind is neither cold nor not-cold.

That is, (A), (B), and (C) are three alternative ways of capturing that, with respect to whether it is cold, the wind is indeterminate.³² Pyrrho does not say, however, that (A), (B), and (C) are true, or that they are true assertions. He describes them as *aphasia*, speechlessness: these are ways of not stating something, not saying that something is such-and-such. But *aphasia* is not a state of falling silent. It is a mode of talk, namely, one in which one refrains from ascribing determinate features to things.

Earlier I mentioned that Plato considers revisionist linguistic practices as approximations. Along these lines, it is conceivable that Pyrrho takes (A), the famous *ou mallon*-phrase, to merely gesture at indeterminacy, rather than to precisely articulate it. The Aristocles report gives no direct indication of any such reservations, which later Pyrrhonians may have articulated (DL 9.76). But the three alternative formulations may indicate that neither is fully adequate to saying how things are—namely, indeterminate.

³² Diogenes Laertius’ report on *ou mallon* includes the observation that in Pyrrhonian skepticism, the expression is not used comparatively, as when we say “the pirate is no more bad than the liar.” Here we assert something, namely that both are equally bad, or that one of them is just as bad as the other. But Pyrrho does not use the expression “declaratively” (θετικῶς ... λέγεται); the point is precisely not to say that something is so-and-so. Cf. DL 9.74–8 on *ou mallon*.

But why do people speak at all? For Pyrrho, it would seem that one can say something true, or at least gesture at something true, by uttering the general claim that things are indeterminate. But with respect to any particular thing, there is a sense in which there is nothing to say.³³ Grammatically, *ou mallon*-sentences are declarative, for example, “it is no more raining than not raining.” But they only convey information in the minimal sense that they exemplify indeterminacy; and they may express indeterminacy only in an approximating fashion. They do not convey a specific piece of information which, for example, someone who wonders whether today she needs to water the garden would find useful. As a specific utterance, “it is no more raining than not raining” is pointless. The speaker could just as well shut up. Why, then, does Pyrrho propose schemata for skeptical utterances, if these are forms of *not* speaking, *aphasia*?

Here Diogenes’ report on Pyrrho and early Pyrrhonism is helpful. Apparently Pyrrho was greatly interested in Homer and considered him an ancestor of his own approach. He (and perhaps other early Pyrrhonians) seem to have quoted Homer extensively. With respect to language, they liked verses such as “The tongue of mortal men is pliant, and many are the tales on it” (*Iliad* 20.248), “The range for words is great” (*Iliad* 20.249), and “Whatever sort of word you might say, such you might hear” (*Iliad* 20.250) (DL 9.73). Other references to Homer suggest that humans mistakenly conceive of themselves as rational, different from the rest of nature. Apparently, early Pyrrhonians were fond of citing the line “Like the generation of leaves, such is that of men” (*Iliad* 6.149) (DL 9.67). The upshot, I suggest, is that for Pyrrho human talk is not the rational undertaking that standard theories of language take it to be. It does not convey information about the world. Rather, language is part of the natural world. Talking is part of what humans do, but they say one thing now and another thing tomorrow.

Pyrrho’s references to early Greek poetry are an ill-understood dimension of his outlook. Hence my suggestions here are tentative. However, if Pyrrho considers talking as something humans will do, just as they grow or see, the speechlessness of “shutting up” is not an option. Rather, the question is *how* one can speak without misrepresenting the world. This seems to be the question Pyrrho addresses.

7. Conclusion

Consider again the Knowledge, Happiness, and Diogenes Constraints. Assuming that we take Aristocles’ framing of his report seriously, we needed a reading that meets the Knowledge Constraint—a reading which ascribes an important epistemological dimension to Pyrrho’s claims. My proposed interpretation meets this criterion. Pyrrho’s position, I have argued, is metaphysical in a sense where metaphysics is steeped in epistemology. The verbatim report of Pyrrho’s views does not mention knowledge. As a

³³ I borrow this phrase from Bett (2019).

claim about knowledge, Pyrrho's position would go like this: given that things are indeterminate, all we can know is *that* they are indeterminate; we cannot know that something is such-and-such, because no thing is such-and-such.

Second, the Happiness Constraint. Pyrrho takes himself to recommend an outlook that comes with a "happy" state of mind. The reading I defended captures this. Pyrrho recommends against wavering, going back and forth between various inclinations to accept things as true, oscillating and not being able to settle on something. He recommends his philosophical outlook as leading to *ataraxia*, tranquility:

T3 [g] and then freedom from worry (*ataraxia*).

If the world were determinate, our happiness might lie in determining how it is. But given that it is not, we have only two options. Either we opine without having a shot at the truth, constantly torn about what to assent to, or we consistently think and say that things are no more this than that. The latter, Pyrrho proposes, constitutes happiness insofar as it frees us from worry. That is, rather than assume that an indeterminate world is dispiriting, Pyrrho takes it that happiness lies in relating to the world as it is. In terms of a different tradition, one might say that he takes his philosophy to counteract doubt. However, here doubt is not resolved by belief or knowledge, as modern approaches have it. Rather, wavering is replaced by a "no more this than that"-state of mind, in recognition of the fact that this is how the world is—or, perhaps, as approximately capturing how the world is.

What then about the Diogenes Constraint? I already mentioned some respects in which my reconstruction is informed by Diogenes' report, regarding Pyrrho's references to earlier metaphysical views and regarding his take on speechlessness. At this point, I only add one consideration, namely how my interpretation resolves the concern Bett (2018) raises, that DL 9.61 sounds as if the metaphysical view that each thing is no more this than that elucidates that Pyrrho defends non-cognition and suspension of judgment.³⁴ The concern is twofold. One, the report seems to merge epistemology and metaphysics such that it becomes undecidable to which field Pyrrho's philosophy belongs. Two, epistemological claims seems to be inferred from a metaphysical one.

Given the line of argument I presented, this is precisely what we should expect. Pyrrho's view is primarily metaphysical, but it is saturated with epistemology; it is thus, in a sense, both. And it makes perfect sense for Pyrrho to infer epistemological ideas from a metaphysical proposal. Given that the world is as it is—indeterminate—humans find themselves not apprehending the world in any determinate way and thus they should suspend judgment. In the terms Pyrrho himself uses, given that things are indeterminate,

³⁴ The term non-cognition (*akatalêpsia*) was coined by the Stoic Zeno, that is, it postdates Pyrrho. That is, Diogenes seems to summarize Pyrrho's view in later terminology.

we should refrain from opinions, inclinations, and wavering. We relate to things in ways that are adequate to their nature—or at least approximately so—if we take them to be no more this than that.

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