

Happiness

Reading 18 – Pyrrho of Elis, Sextus Empiricus & Skepticism

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This reading comes from the Cave's
Happiness—What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Happiness.

As the title indicates, this reading, after a brief introduction, presents what the ancient skeptics, including Pyrrho of Elis and Sextus Empiricus, thought and said about happiness, with a summary at the end.

"If any of the learned be inclined, from their natural temper, to haughtiness and obstinacy, a small tincture of Pyrrhonism might abate their pride by showing them that the few advantages which they may have attained over their fellows are but inconsiderable if compared with the universal perplexity and confusion which is inherent in human nature. . . . Another species of mitigated skepticism which may be of advantage to mankind, and which may be the natural result of the Pyrrhonian doubts and scruples, is the limitation of our enquiries to such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding."

—David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*

PYRRHO OF ELIS (c. 365-275 BC) began his adult life as a painter. Diogenes Laertius informs us that he was a "poor and unknown painter" of modest ability. He further reports that there are "still some okay looking torch-racers of his in the gymnasium at Elis."¹

Whether Diogenes Laertius saw the paintings or not, we don't know. What is likely, though, is that Pyrrho was familiar with painters who had more talent than he ever had. If so, then Pyrrho probably saw the work of some very skilled Greek painters, ones

who were able to fool the eye with their paintings in a tradition going back (at least) to the *trompe l'oeil* paintings of Zeuxis and Parrhasius. The story goes that they painted so realistically that the images in their works fooled both the human eye and that of animals. The point is significant because it is possible that the apparent realism of such paintings, and Pyrrho's own striving to realistically present three-dimensional reality in two dimensions, had a strong impact on Pyrrho's general thinking about the nature of things. *What you see is not always what you get*. Unfortunately, however, the possible impact is only conjecture, and we must leave it at that.

Pyrrho, in any case, seems to have eventually passed on from painting to philosophy. Diogenes Laertius tells us that he ultimately settled on what came to be called skepticism, "a most noble philosophy," Diogenes Laertius asserts, "that introduces the ideas of 'non-apprehension' or 'non-understanding' and 'suspension'" —in other words, a philosophy that refuses to say, "I understand," and so one that promotes a complete suspension of judgment relative to things. "The skeptics posit nothing definite—so much so that they even refute their own positing of nothing definite by saying, 'We posit nothing.'"²

The skeptics went by many names that indicate their basic mode of operation. They were called "zetetics," from the Greek verb *zēteō* (to seek, inquire), because "they were always seeking the truth." Similarly, they were called "skeptics," or those who thoughtfully reflect on or look at matters, from *skeptomai* (to look carefully; to examine), since "they were always examining things but never finding a conclusion." In such an inconclusive state, they were called "aporetics," those inclined to doubt, from *aporeō* (to be at a loss, doubtful, puzzled), because "they were at a loss" and, therefore, always doubtful about the matter at hand.³

But what was the point? Were the skeptics merely disagreeable? Were they the ancient equivalent of online trolls, arguing just to bother people? Did they simply want to tear everything down without building something up in its place? Not at all. Instead, as we'll see, the point of skepticism was the power to

remain undisturbed by all things. In positive terms, the goal was tranquility, peace of mind—in a word, happiness.

Sextus Empiricus, who lived much later toward the end of the second century AD, expressed the point of skepticism this way: "The reason skepticism exists is the hope we have of attaining tranquility."⁴ Although we know very little about him, except that he was a physician of the "Empiricist school of medicine," Sextus Empiricus is our major source for much of ancient skepticism. Through him we know the various "modes" that skeptics utilized to suspend judgment and thus be at peace or be happy.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

We begin with a set of selections that offers insight into Pyrrho of Elis' training, beliefs, and way of life.

For him and the early skeptics, the goal of life is "impassibility" or "freedom from emotion," as well as "mildness or gentleness," a state of soul or mind that is brought about thanks to the suspension of judgment regarding what is good and what is evil.

Diogenes Laertius Pyrrho was Anaxarchus' pupil and traveled with him everywhere so that he even met up with the gymnosophists, the naked philosophers of India, and the Magi. Accordingly, he seems to have taken up a most noble philosophy—as Ascanius of Abdera related it—one that introduces the notions of "non-apprehension" or "non-understanding" and "suspension."

Pyrrho affirmed that there were neither honorable nor shameful things, just nor unjust things. Similarly, about all things, he said that no one thing truly or actually *is*. Instead, convention and custom accomplish all things for human beings since each thing is no more *this* than *that*.

Pyrrho led a life in keeping with this teaching, going out of his way for nothing and taking no precaution. Rather, he faced all risks as they came.⁵

Diogenes Laertius Some say that, according to the skeptics, the goal of life is impassibility—that is,

freedom from emotion. Others say it is mildness or gentleness.⁶

Diogenes Laertius There is nothing good or evil by nature. The reason? If there is something good or evil by nature, then it must be good or evil for everyone, just as snow is cold for everyone. But there is no such thing that is good or evil for everyone. Therefore, there is no such thing that is good or evil by nature.⁷

Diogenes Laertius Now, we must not say that everything that is supposed good is good since the same thing is supposed good by one person and evil by another. Epicurus, for example, supposed that pleasure is good, whereas Antisthenes supposed that it is evil. If this were the case, then the same thing would be both good and evil.⁸

Diogenes Laertius There are differences between living beings relative to what gives them pleasure and pain, as well as what is harmful and helpful. By this fact, the Pyrrhonists infer that the same things do not always produce the same presentations (how things appear) in different living beings. Given this battle of presentations, it follows that one should suspend judgment.⁹

Diogenes Laertius Posidonius recounts the following story about Pyrrho. When some people who were sailing with him were looking gloomy and upset because of a storm, Pyrrho kept calm and strong-minded, pointing to a little pig in the ship that went on eating as though nothing were wrong. He told them that a wise man should similarly remain tranquil.¹⁰

The second set of selections presents the skepticism of Sextus Empiricus. Once again, we see that skeptics suspend judgment to attain tranquility (happiness). Contrary to what the so-called “dogmatists” say about what produces happiness, skeptics are at peace with the suspension of judgment.

Sextus Empiricus The reason skepticism exists is the

hope we have of attaining tranquility.¹¹

Sextus Empiricus Cyrenaicism differs from skepticism. It declares that pleasure and a certain smooth motion of the flesh is the goal for human beings, whereas we skeptics say that it is tranquility, which stands in opposition to their goal. This is so because, whether pleasure is nearby or not, troubles remain even for the one who confirms that pleasure is the goal.¹²

Sextus Empiricus The dogmatists [philosophers with defined judgments or beliefs—*dogmas*] all grant that the good is helpful and choiceworthy, . . . and that it produces happiness. But when they are asked about what it is, exactly, that possesses all these attributes, they implacably battle without end—some declaring the good to be virtue, others pleasure, others a state without pain, and others declare still other things to be the good. . . . These dogmatists similarly differ about what is evil. . . . It is clear, therefore, that they have not actually helped us understand any of these things. But this is nothing unreasonable. They are tripping over things that are probably non-existent.¹³

Sextus Empiricus Skepticism is a skill that opposes appearances to judgments, examining both in every possible way. The result is that, given the equipollence of the objects and the rational considerations thus opposed, we skeptics come first to a suspension of judgment, and after to tranquility. . . . “Suspension of judgment” is the condition of our thoughts and understanding in which we neither choose nor posit things. Tranquility is freedom from disturbance and calmness of soul.¹⁴

Sextus Empiricus When skeptics suspend judgment, tranquility happens to follow even as a shadow follows a body.¹⁵

Sextus Empiricus The skeptic’s goal is tranquility relative to those things having to do with opinion, and measured emotion relative to those things having to do with necessity.

For skeptics first did philosophy in order to pass judgment on presentations (how things appear) so that they could grasp which ones were true and which ones were false—and all this for tranquility. But falling into equipollent contradictions, they were unable to pass judgment, and so they suspended judgment. It just so happened that, when they suspended judgment relative to those things having to do with opinion, tranquility followed.

By contrast, those who suppose that anything is good or evil by nature are always disturbed. Therefore, when they don't have the things that they suppose are good, they believe they are tormented by things that are evil by nature. And so they go after things that are good—or so they imagine. Yet when they get these, there's even greater disturbance thanks to all the irrational and immoderate elation they experience. And then, fearing change, they do everything so that they won't lose those things that seem good to them.

In contrast to these men are those who refuse to determine what is naturally good or evil. The latter men neither eagerly flee from nor eagerly pursue things. Consequently, they experience tranquility.

There's a story about what happened to the painter Apelles. Well, the same thing happened to the first skeptics. Once, they say, when Apelles was painting a horse, he wanted to portray the foam coming from the horse's mouth in the painting. He was so unsuccessful, however, that he gave up the attempt. And taking the sponge he used to clean the paint from his brush, he flung it at the painting. This—the mark of the sponge—produced a copy of

the foam coming from the horse's mouth. Similarly, the skeptics hoped to achieve tranquility by making judgments about the inconsistencies that show up relative to things of sense and things of thought. Being unable to do this, however, they suspended judgment. But when the skeptics suspended judgment, tranquility happened to follow even as a shadow follows a body.

That said, we do not believe the skeptic is wholly undisturbed. Rather, we say he is disturbed relative to those things having to do with necessity. . . . Therefore, we say that, relative to those things having to do with opinion, the skeptic's goal is tranquility, and relative to those things having to do with necessity, it is measured emotion.¹⁶

HAPPINESS FOR THE SKEPTICS

For the skeptics, including Pyrrho of Elis and the much later Sextus Empiricus, happiness is tranquility, which is a kind of impassibility or freedom from emotion. Tranquility is the goal of life.

How to reach this goal? The path to follow is the suspension of judgment relative to whether something is good or evil, beneficial or harmful, and so on. In doing so, tranquility naturally follows—yet not tranquility relative to all things but only to those things having to do with opinion or judgment. Relative to those things having to do with necessity, things that do not rely on judgment, the goal is measured emotion. One final point. According to what “some say,” anyway, the skeptic's life of tranquility and measured emotion leads to a mild or gentle disposition.

So ends Reading 18. **See you in Reading 19, “Plotinus & Neoplatonism.”**

NOTES

¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 9.62.

² Ibid., 9.61, 74. Of interest, perhaps, is the fact that Diogenes Laertius ties Pyrrho's skepticism to his travels with the Greek philosopher Anaxarchus and their time with the naked philosophers (gymnosophists) of India and the Magi of Persia. Among other topics of study, Thomas McEvilley explores the relation between skepticism and Pyrrhonism and various Indian schools of philosophy in *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (2002). See, for instance, Chapter Thirteen, “Skepticism, Empiricism, and Naturalism,” and Chapter Seventeen, “Pyrrhonism and Mādhyaṃika.”

³ Ibid., 9.69-70. Diogenes Laertius also calls them “Pyrrhoneans” “from [the name of their] teacher” and “Ephectics” from the Greek *ephektikos*, which refers to the feeling or condition (*pathos*) skeptics experience in conjunction with the process of seeking—that is, *epochē* or the suspension the judgment.

⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.12.

⁵ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 9.61. According to Diogenes Laertius, Anaxarchus of Abdera (mid to late fourth century BC) studied with Diogenes of Smyrna, who studied with Metrodorus of Chios, who studied with Nessas of Chios or Democritus of Abdera. Metrodorus, Diogenes Laertius reports, “Used to say that he knew nothing—not even the fact that he knew nothing.” As for Anaxarchus, he was “called the Happy Man” or “the one who promotes happiness” thanks to his “tranquility and contentment of life” (ibid., 9.60).

By “suspension” (*epochē*), Diogenes Laertius means “suspension of judgment”—the refusal to judge whether something is or is not.

⁶ Ibid., 9.108. “Impassibility” or “freedom from emotion” is *apatheia*. Mildness or gentleness is *praotēs*. *Apatheia* is often given as “insensible.” The idea is that the impassible or insensible person cannot be affected in any significant way by pain or suffering—that is, by any negative passion or emotion, including any negative thoughts or judgments that may lead to negative emotions.

⁷ Ibid., 9.101.

⁸ Ibid., 9.101. For Epicurus on pleasure as good, see ibid., 10.128-129, “We say that pleasure is the beginning point and goal of living happily. We recognize that pleasure is our first good.” For Antisthenes the Cynic on pleasure as evil, see ibid., 6.3, “Again and again [Antisthenes] said, ‘I would rather go insane than enjoy myself with pleasure.’” And ibid., 6.8, “When someone extolled a luxurious life, [Antisthenes] said, ‘May the sons of your enemies have a luxurious life’”—that is, a life filled with ease and pleasure.

⁹ Ibid., 9.79. “Presentation” is *phantasia*, sometimes given as “impression.”

¹⁰ Ibid., 9.68. “Calm” is *galēnos*. “Tranquil” is *ataraxia*.

¹¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.12. “Tranquility” may also be given as “non-disturbance.”

¹² Ibid., 1.215. “Trouble” is *tarachē* whereas the Skeptic goal is to be *without tarachē* or *a-tarachē* (*ataraxia*).

¹³ Ibid., 3.175-176, 178.

¹⁴ Ibid., 1.8, 10. “Freedom from disturbance” is *aochlēsia*. “Calmness” is *galēnotēs*.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1.29.

¹⁶ Ibid., 1.25-30.

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