

Pyrrho, his Antecedents, and his Legacy. By Richard Bett. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. Pp. xi + 264. \$60.

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Many different interpretations of Pyrrho's thought have been advanced within the last twenty years or so, since careful research on the topic has first been made possible thanks to the publication of Decleva Caizzi's precious collection of the extant testimonies on Pyrrho. The varied and conflicting character of the different interpretations reflects an embarrassing variety and conflict in the evidence offered by the sources themselves, and the liability of some crucial texts to a number of competing readings; the question appears so thorny that some have even despaired of succeeding in devising a *single* consistent account of Pyrrho's outlook.

Bett's approach is more optimistic. Fully aware that there is no prospect of our being able to *establish with certainty* the correctness of any comprehensive interpretation of Pyrrho's philosophy, the author declares to be aiming at something 'more modest': shaping a coherent interpretation that, although controversial, is at least '*more probable* than the alternatives' (12)¹. The inner difficulty of this 'modest' task appears clear when one reads Bett's monograph: almost 250 pages are devoted to it, and the reader constantly feels that not even a leaf is superfluous for defending the author's case.

Bett's main contention is that the position of Pyrrho is 'significantly different from what has generally been thought of as *the* Pyrrhonist outlook' (I), namely the outlook embodied in Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*: 'rather than suspending judgement because of the 'equal strength' of incompatible views and perspectives, it looks as if Pyrrho declared reality to be inherently indeterminate' (4) (a view which would clearly qualify as utter dogmatism in Sextus' eyes).

The first chapter, significantly entitled 'Pyrrho the Non-Sceptic', is the core of the book: it examines Pyrrho's most general theoretical ideas, and particularly what Bett christens 'indeterminacy thesis' (the thesis to the effect that reality is intrinsically indeterminate). Bett agrees with most scholars that Aristocles' short account of Pyrrho's philosophy (quoted *verbatim* in Eusebius' *Praeparatio evangelica* 14.18.1-5) is by far the best piece of evidence we can rely on in our attempt of investigating Pyrrho's outlook. According to Bett, Aristocles

is a quite reliable source in general², and, unlike many other sources, does not seem liable here to the charge of anachronism, since ‘the passage dealing specifically with the thought of Pyrrho ... gives the strong impression of being uncontaminated by any later phase of Pyrrhonism’ (15):

τὰ μὲν οὖν πράγματά <Timon> φησιν αὐτὸν [*scil.* Pyrrho] 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 ἑνὸς ἑκάστου 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’ ἠδονήν. (Eus. *PE* 14.18.2-5)

Unfortunately, the interpretation of this very piece of evidence is itself a matter of wide controversy. In answer to the question ‘What are things like by nature?’, Pyrrho is said by his ‘spokesman’ Timon to ‘reveal’ that things are equally ἀδιάφορα καὶ ἀστάθμητα καὶ ἀνεπίκριτα. The elucidation of the exact meaning of these adjectives is crucial for our understanding of Pyrrho’s thought, and has been at the center of the scholarly debate. Bett lucidly spells out the two most prominent exegetic alternatives: the three epithets ‘may be read as drawing attention to something about things themselves’ (things are *intrinsically* ‘indifferent’, ‘unstable’, and ‘indeterminate’), or ‘as drawing attention to something about our grasp of, or cognitive access to, things’ (things are ‘undifferentiable’, ‘unmeasurable’, and ‘indeterminable’ *by us*). Bett calls them the ‘metaphysical’ and the ‘epistemological’ readings respectively (19): some version of the first has been propounded, for example, by Decleva Caizzi 1981, Long&Sedley 1987, and Hankinson 1995; the latter, which has remained the standard one a long time, has found a particularly sensible advocate in Stopper 1983³. According to Bett, both readings of the Greek text are possible, but the controversy can be settled if we examine carefully which one ‘better fits the logic of the passage’ (22). For the inference immediately drawn (διὰ τοῦτο μήτε τὰς αἰσθήσεις ἡμῶν μήτε τὰς δόξας ἀληθεύειν ἢ ψεύδεσθαι) makes sense *only* if we endorse the metaphysical reading: that our sensations and opinions are neither true nor false does not follow from, and is inconsistent with, the epistemological view that the nature of things is undiscoverable for us; on the other hand, it perfectly follows from the metaphysical doctrine that the nature of things is inherently indeterminate.

I believe that both claims are actually disputable; since Bett's interpretation of Pyrrho's thought, and of the whole history of Pyrrhonism, relies on his metaphysical reading of the three adjectives, which in turn admittedly relies on his evaluation of the soundness of the inference, it is certainly worth spending some words on this point. What about the alleged unsoundness of the inference on the epistemological reading? I fully agree with the author that the inference, *if taken at face value*, is invalid: 'if the nature of things is undiscoverable, then it will *also* be undiscoverable whether our sensations and opinions are true or false or neither; in order to pronounce on the truth-value of our sensations and opinions, one needs to be in a position to say what the objects of those sensations and opinions are actually like' (22). Bett explicitly refuses to understand μήτε τὰς αἰσθήσεις ἡμῶν μήτε τὰς δόξας ἀληθεύειν ἢ ψεύδεσθαι as 'we are *unable to tell* whether our sensations or opinions are true or false', which would make the inference easily valid; in principle he is absolutely right, but one should never forget that our precious account is, after all, a fourth-hand account (Eusebius declares to be quoting Aristocles, who claims to be summarizing what Timon said on Pyrrho, who, as well-known, left nothing in writing himself). That at some point of the chain an error might have occurred is not wild speculation.

More interestingly, there is a possible emendation of the text, first proposed by Zeller and strongly defended by Stopper, which would restore the logic of the inference:

τὰ μὲν οὖν πράγματα φησιν αὐτὸν ἀποφαίνειν ἐπ' ἴσης ἀδιάφορα καὶ ἀστάθμητα καὶ ἀνεπίκριτα, διὰ τὸ μήτε τὰς αἰσθήσεις ἡμῶν μήτε τὰς δόξας ἀληθεύειν ἢ ψεύδεσθαι.

The hypothesis of a corruption of διὰ τό in διὰ τοῦτο would be easily understandable from a paleographic point of view, given the διὰ τοῦτο occurring in the next sentence, and has been supported also with two linguistic hints. Stopper suggested that διὰ τοῦτο at the beginning of the clause leaves an odd asyndeton in the text, Furley that the use of the negatives μήτε ... μήτε would be incorrect with διὰ τοῦτο (and thus with infinitives in indirect discourse), but correct with διὰ τό (i.e. with infinitives with the definite article). Bett replies that 'in sentences beginning with demonstrative phrases like 'for this reason', referring back to the previous sentence, it is by no means unheard of the dispense with any particle' (25-26): this is true, but I think it is still worth noting that Aristocles uses διὰ τοῦτο other seven times in our extant testimonies, and *never* with asyndeton. More convincingly, the author explains that 'the rule that infinitives in indirect discourse use negatives of the form *ou* ... is subject to

exceptions ... even in the classical period, and later appears to be more or less abandoned' (26).

However that may be, let us grant Bett that the emendation is unnecessary from a merely linguistic point of view (he cannot but grant, in turn, that the Zeller-Stopper emendation remains possible). Bett maintains that in any case the emendation would fail in restoring the logic of the inference: 'we are now being told that the nature of things is undiscoverable *because* our sensations and opinions are neither true nor false. But this is nonsense' (27). Once again, *prima facie* Bett seems to be right; but this time it is only because he is being rather unfair with the proponents of the epistemological reading. According to Stopper, the text is to be emended *and* ἀληθεύειν and ψεύδεσθαι must be understood, respectively, as 'to be *constant* truth-tellers' and 'to be *constant* liars': reality is indeterminable 'for our sensations and opinions are neither constant truth-tellers nor constant liars', and this lack of epistemic constancy makes them unreliable criteria. Bett does not even contemplate this translation of the verbs in the main text, and so it is only too easy for him to make the proposal of emendation look absolutely devoid of any rationale. The author devotes a two-pages appendix to the meaning of ἀληθεύειν and ψεύδεσθαι (60-62): he admits that the two verbs can be used to refer to a constant practice of telling the truth or the false, if the context makes it clear that repeated activity over time is at issue (a point brilliantly proved in Brennan 1998), but he leaves unexplained why he refuses to take this possibility seriously in our case (it should be noted that Bett himself admits that other two occurrences of ἀληθεύειν in *Aristocles* carry the Stopper-Brennan meaning⁴; both Brennan and Bett fail to point out explicitly that these are the *only* occurrences of ἀληθεύειν in all *Aristocles*, and thus no usage of ἀληθεύειν with a more standard nuance is attested). According to Bett, the adoption of his plain translation of ἀληθεύειν and ψεύδεσθαι is nothing less than the *crux* of his argument in favor of the metaphysical reading of the passage (60): probably the point would have deserved a fuller treatment in the main text, instead of a cursory touch in an appendix (surprisingly enough, Bett even fears he is treating the possibility of the alternative translation 'at tedious and excessive length'! [60n92]). Bett argues also that, in any case, 'if the generality of the context sometimes allows 'tell the truth' to be used to refer to *constancy in telling the truth*, then a similar generality ought to allow the *denial* that someone or something tells the truth to be used to refer to *constancy in failing to tell the truth* – not to a *failure to maintain constancy* in telling the truth' (61). This seems to me utterly wrong: something similar could be the case only if we confused *contradictoriness* with *contrariety*.

We can conclude that, *pace* Bett, the epistemological reading makes quite a good sense of the inference if the (easy) emendation is adopted and the second clause is understood as Stopper and Brennan suggest.

Now, what about the metaphysical reading? Does it make the inference at least equally intelligible (and without any need of emending the received text)? Bett is quite confident that this is the case, that ‘this time the logic is perspicuous’ (23):

In order for a certain sensation or opinion to be either true or false, there must be some definite *state of affairs* that the sensation or opinion either correctly or incorrectly represents. But if reality is inherently indeterminate, there are *no* definite states of affairs ... Hence our sensations and opinions ... are neither true nor false. They are not true, since the sensation that the tomato is red, or the opinion that the earth is spherical, could be true only if certain definite states of affairs (the tomato’s being red or the earth’s being spherical) actually obtained—which is precisely what the indeterminacy thesis denies. But they are not false either, since that too would require that there be some definite state of affairs, a state of affairs *contrary* to the one represented by the sensation or opinion—such as the tomato’s being *not* red (but, say, green), or the earth’s being *not* spherical (but, say, cylindrical).

Bett’s validation of the inference relies on a conception of falseness according to which in order for a proposition ‘*x* is *F*’ to be false it is not sufficient that it is not true (that the state of affairs *x*’s being *F* does not obtain), but some *contrary* proposition must be true (some definite state of affairs like *x*’s being *G* must obtain, where *x*’s being *G* is incompatible with *x*’s being *F*). Bett symbolizes this contrary state of affairs as $\neg(x \text{ is } F)$, but this seems to me wholly misleading: $\neg(x \text{ is } F)$ would not be a state of affairs *contrary* to *x*’s being *F*, but a state of affairs *contradictory* to it (a negative state of affairs – if one is ready to accept such a controversial concept – and, in any case, not a *definite* one). Apart from this unpleasant symbolic confusion, Bett can certainly base his analysis upon such a conception of falseness for saving the soundness of the inference as he understands it, but he can by no means claim that he is adopting here ‘an everyday conception of falseness’ (23n19)⁵, and the burden of proving that such a conception could be endorsed by Pyrrho, or at least by someone at Pyrrho’s time, is (weighty) on him.

If we endorse a more standard conception of falseness, in virtue of which ‘*x* is *F*’ is not true, *that is* is false, whenever the state of affairs *x*’s being *F* does not obtain, then the inference becomes invalid on the metaphysical reading: if reality is indeterminate, no definite

states of affairs obtain, and thus every proposition of the form ‘ x is F ’ becomes false (and every proposition like ‘ $\neg(x$ is $F)$ ’ true).

It seems to me, thus, that, *pace* Bett, the analysis of the logic of the passage cannot decide here between the two readings of the three adjectives, and certainly not in favor of the metaphysical one. (One could argue also against Bett’s initial suggestion that both translations of the series of epithets are equally possible. I am not persuaded that the fact that ἀνεπίκριτα looks ‘subjective’ in view of its etymology does not settle anything, because ‘even a subjective-looking word may be used to make an ‘objective point’’ (19n13). ἀνεπίκριτα cannot mean ‘indeterminate (*in themselves*)’, and cannot but mean ‘indeterminable/-ate (*by someone*)’. The fact that a thing can be indeterminable/-ate by us simply *because* there is objectively nothing determinate out there is a quite different point, which can be easily conceded to a supporter of the metaphysical interpretation: but this is far from admitting that ἀνεπίκριτα may mean here, or anywhere else, ‘indeterminate in themselves’. It could be suggested to an advocate of the metaphysical interpretation a translation like ‘things are indifferent, unstable, and therefore indeterminable by us’, but this leaves the following inference still problematic).

Once Bett has espoused the metaphysical reading, the rest of his analysis flows more smoothly: we should not trust our sensations and opinions, being ‘without opinions’ (ἀδοξάστοι), ‘without inclinations’ (ἀκλινεῖς) and ‘without wavering’ (ἀκραδάντους), ‘because any opinions we might have would be neither true nor false’ (30). It is worth noting that Bett must assume that in this passage δόξαι are *only* the first-order opinions, either everyday or cosmological, which attribute definite features to the ordinary objects and states of affairs revealed to us by the senses: the second-order claims of Aristocles’ passage, including the indeterminacy thesis itself, will not count as δόξαι in Pyrrho’s eyes (24-25).

The formula οὐ(δ□) μᾶλλον is interpreted accordingly: it does not express *suspension of judgement* as to whether the object is F or not F (or F and not F , or neither F nor not F), as in Sextus’ redefinition in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, but the *assertion* that the object is to no greater extent F than not F (than F and not F , than neither F nor not F), that is that all these claims are ‘true to the same degree’. Apart from the oddity of the phrase ‘true to the same degree’ (truth, properly speaking, does not admit degrees), we understand what Bett means: ‘none of these possibilities is either true or false’ (35), they all share the same ‘truth-value’, because reality is inherently indeterminate. According to Bett, the central ‘Pyrrhonian’ concepts of ἰσοσθένεια and ἐποχή are absolutely alien to Pyrrho’s thought (38-39): if one should protest that the indeterminacy thesis and its epistemic consequences do not taste of

skepticism at all (at least to a Sextan palate), Bett will be happy to reply that this is just the main thesis of his book.

In the final part of Chapter 1 the author tries to show that a number of ancient testimonies which look *prima facie* incompatible with his metaphysical reading actually create no serious difficulties: some of them can be reinterpreted in a way which is fully consistent with the metaphysical interpretation, others reveal only that a later Pyrrhonist type of outlook has been often foisted anachronistically on Pyrrho by later sources. It is not possible here to assess the force of Bett's arguments in each case: sometimes they are wholly persuasive; sometimes Bett's reading of the texts, although fairly possible, sounds quite unlikely, and certainly is not the most straightforward; always they deserve careful inspection, and the reader has the feeling that Bett is making the best possible case for his interpretation, with a full mastery of the texts and of the problems they pose⁶.

Chapter 2 ('Putting it into Practice') is devoted to an analysis of Pyrrho's practical attitudes, as they emerge from Timon's fragments and from numerous colorful anecdotes about Pyrrho's behavior and activities. The reliability of such stories is assessed carefully each time, by considering 'whether, and how, the kinds of behaviour described in the stories might be understandable as a practical expression of the central tenets of Pyrrho's philosophy', as interpreted in Chapter 1 on the basis of the Aristocles' passage (67). Bett shows that most texts, if read *cum grano salis*, can convey credible information about Pyrrho's practical attitudes⁷: the anecdotes 'emphasize Pyrrho's lack of concern for social norms', his 'total disregard of the conventions prescribing social interactions', 'and his lack of susceptibility to various kinds of powerful (but common) emotional reactions' (e.g. pain), while the dominant theme of Timon's account 'is that Pyrrho was free from disturbance because of his freedom from opinions and from theorizing' (75). On the basis of the sources, Bett argues also that 'in early Pyrrhonism, just as in later Pyrrhonism, acceptance of the appearances was permitted, and used as a basis for choice and action' (91), i.e. as a practical criterion⁸, thus avoiding the charge of inactivity⁹ (but social norms and conventions were not included under the heading φαίνόμενα as in later Pyrrhonism).

This whole account is shown to be fully consistent with Pyrrho's being ἀδοξάστος and his ἀταραξία, the two most prominent features of Pyrrho's disposition in Aristocles' report. However, this should not be regarded as a corroboration of Bett's interpretation of Aristocles' account, since these features are accounted for by any interpretation of Pyrrho's thought, and Pyrrho's practical outlook follows from these very features, whereas it is unimportant whether the 'lack of opinions' and the consequent 'freedom from disturbance' derive from an

acceptance of a metaphysical view like the indeterminacy thesis, or from a Sextan-style suspension of judgement about the intrinsic nature of things (*contra* Bett [80]).

The remaining two chapters are devoted to the attempt of shaping a consistent account of the likely influences upon Pyrrho (ch. 3, ‘Looking Backwards’) and of how he could have been taken as an inspiration by the later Pyrrhonists (ch. 4, ‘Looking Forwards’), provided we understand Pyrrho’s outlook along the lines suggested by Bett in the first two chapters. That this task is not deemed as a secondary one by the author is manifested by the fact that these chapters cover more than a half of the whole book: assessing whether Pyrrho’s place in the history of Greek philosophy is accounted for as well on the metaphysical interpretation as on the others is a fundamental test for assessing the relative plausibility of the competing readings.

But chapter 3 is essential also because its first section gives us a much deeper understanding of the indeterminacy thesis, whose exact significance is left exceedingly indeterminate in chapter 1, and addresses the crucial question (not touched previously) why someone at Pyrrho’s time might have been attracted to such a thesis (114). The following is the fullest explication of the indeterminacy thesis to be found in chapter 1:

[T]o say that things are ‘indifferent’ presumably means that they are not, in their real natures, any different from one another—no doubt because they do not *have* any real natures of a sort that would permit such differentiation; to say that they are ‘unstable’ must mean that they do not have any *fixed* natures; and to say that they are ‘indeterminate’ must mean that they do not have any *definite* natures. (28-29)

Elsewhere, the author claims that ‘there are *no* definite states of affairs’ (23), that ‘nothing is determinately either the case or not the case’ (23), that ‘it is not clear that we can even speak of some definitely numerable set of ‘things’’ (43), or that ‘there are not, in the nature of things, any of the stable objects that we normally take to compose the world around us’ (51).

The concept of ‘nature’ seems to be central in the formulation of the indeterminacy thesis: and chapter 3 helps us to understand this concept, by presenting the ‘invariability condition’: ‘in order for an object to be a certain way *by nature*, it must be that way *invariably* or *without qualifications*. Hence something that is *F* only *in some circumstances* (but not-*F* in other circumstances), or *F* only *in certain respects* (but not-*F* in certain other respects), is thereby *not by nature F*’ (118).

Bett's hypothesis, admittedly speculative, is that the indeterminacy thesis is the philosophical outcome of Pyrrho's acceptance of the invariability condition, conjoined with his recognition of the ubiquitousness of the 'phenomenon of variability', i.e. of 'the variable and often conflicting ways in which things strike us – the differing impressions of the same objects experienced by different people, or by the same people at different times, owing to changes in the objects themselves, to differences or changes in the circumstances or perspectives of the viewers, and to a variety of other causes'¹⁰ (114-115). On Bett's reading, that very variability which in later Pyrrhonism will be the main route to suspension of judgement through the ἰσοσθένεια of the conflicting appearances drives Pyrrho to the indeterminacy thesis because of his endorsement of the invariability condition (116): since x is sometimes F and sometimes not- F , x is not (by nature) F and is not (by nature) not- F (and is not (by nature) F and not- F , and is not (by nature) neither F nor not- F).

Now that the import of Pyrrho's indeterminacy thesis has become much clearer, some objections can be raised. As we have seen, according to Bett Pyrrho maintains that any proposition like ' x is (by nature) F ' is neither true nor false; I presume that, in this case, also its contradictory ' x is not (by nature) F ' should be neither true nor false. But, in virtue of the invariability condition supposedly endorsed by Pyrrho,

if x is not invariably F , then x is not (by nature) F

should be a true conditional. And, according to Bett, a 'supplementary assumption needed for this line of thought [*scil.* Pyrrho's argument for the indeterminacy of reality] to be complete is simply that the temporary and contingent character of an object ... is not, at least in general, itself a matter of obscurity' (120)¹¹: that x is not invariably F is a matter of plain experience everyone is supposed to accept as true (at least in a mundane sense of 'true'). Thus a proposition *neither true nor false* (about the real nature of things) would *validly* follow from a *true* proposition (about our everyday experience); and this sounds rather suspect.

A second concern regards Bett's interpretation of the adjective ἀστάθμητα: things are in their nature 'unstable', that is 'they do not have any *fixed* natures', but only changeable and variable natures (134n37). But the very idea of an 'unstable nature' does seem to me hopelessly oxymoronic, given the meaning of 'nature' conveyed by the invariability condition: what is variable is the *appearances*, and it is this very variability that assures that things in themselves *fixedly* are none of the ways they appear. Having a changeable nature seems to be inconsistent also with the other qualifications of πράγματα, as Bett reads them:

for a change to occur, things should have *definite* and *identifiably different* natures before and after the change, just what on Bett's interpretation the epithets ἀνεπίκριτα and ἀδιάφορα deny, and thus the three aspects of the indeterminacy thesis, far from being complementary, would turn out to be incompatible.

There seems to be some potential conflict also between Bett's claim that in virtue of the indeterminacy thesis 'it is not clear that we can even speak of some definitely numerable set of 'things'' and the invariability condition: the latter requires that we can identify *an* object, numerically *distinct* from others, which strikes us variably, in order to infer that *that* object lacks any definite intrinsic nature (and consequently is qualitatively ἀδιάφορον from other objects).

No less problematic appears Bett's idea that if reality is indeterminate the state of affairs designated by '*x* is *F*' 'neither obtains *nor does not obtain*' (23n19)¹². I cannot see what this could amount to, and where is supposed to derive from: if *x* is not invariably *F* then, for the invariability condition, the state of affairs *x*'s being (by nature) *F* simply does not obtain, *i.e.* fails to obtain (perhaps Bett is thinking to some thesis, parallel to that on falsehood but much more outlandish, to the effect that a state of affairs fails to obtain only if some incompatible definite state of affairs obtains).

These sketchy remarks do not prove necessarily that Bett's indeterminacy thesis is hopelessly defective (and thereby suspect as a reading of the Aristocles' passage), but they seem to suggest at least the opportunity of some rethinking and revision of the details of its formulation.

In the remaining sections of the chapter, the author proceeds to the scrutiny of possible candidates to the role of precursor or antecedent of Pyrrho's outlook. Bett aims at showing that some philosophers whose doctrines, for various reasons, have been considered akin to Pyrrho's ideas actually do not present *significant* resemblance (the unnamed opponents of Aristotle in *Metaphysics* IV, the Megarians, the Indian 'naked wise men'), while others are argued to present quite relevant analogies, but not the same as those frequently pointed out by the scholars (the Eleatics, Xenophanes, Protagoras, Democritus, Anaxarchus). These latter have been usually associated with Pyrrho because of their 'skeptical' (loosely speaking) *epistemologies*; Bett's task is to show that the reasons why such associations occurred (and why Timon surprisingly offers qualified praise of these philosophers) are different, and indeed compatible with his own *metaphysical* understanding of Pyrrho. The task is arduous, probably more arduous than Bett admits. Assessing Bett's arguments as carefully as they deserve would require a space we do not have here; most of them are very clever, some others less

convincing. For example, I find quite unintuitive the suggestion that Xenophanes' central role in Timon's *Silloi* can be accounted for simply by his criticism of the traditional Homeric view of the gods as anthropomorphic and morally imperfect (147), or that Timon's appreciation of Protagoras' agnosticism is not an appreciation of such an attitude *per se*, but only of Protagoras' 'freedom from the constraints of ordinary opinion' displayed through that disposition (150).

But the most interesting and original section of the chapter is probably that exploring the relations between Pyrrho's outlook, the view of the sensible world discussed at the end of *Republic V*, and the thesis of total instability criticized in the *Theaetetus*: Bett argues that for 'a key portion of his philosophy Pyrrho is indebted, directly or indirectly, to Plato', this key portion being the thesis that ordinary objects cannot be really whatever they variably appear to be (clearly a version of the invariability condition). Pyrrho would emerge as a 'Plato without Forms'¹³ (143).

Whatever one decides to do of his overall account of Pyrrho and of his claim that on such a reading Pyrrho's figure turns out 'to be by no means extraordinary for its time and place' (113), Bett has the indisputable merit of submitting to our attention a series of texts deserving the careful inspection of any scholar of the origins of ancient skepticism.

The last chapter confronts the reader with a delicate final question: if Pyrrho's outlook was as different from that of Sextus as Bett suggests, why did later Pyrrhonists consider Pyrrho (the 'non-sceptic' Pyrrho) as a forerunner, and call themselves 'Pyrrhonists'? The author's ingenious answer consists in distinguishing two phases within the later Pyrrhonist tradition: a terminal phase, represented by the writing of Sextus' himself (with the exception of *Against the Ethicists*¹⁴), and an initial phase, represented by the founder of the tradition, Aenesidemus (189). Bett argues that the initial phase is much closer to Pyrrho's outlook than the terminal one, and that this can account for the question why Aenesidemus decided to adopt Pyrrho (a quite obscure figure at his time) as an ideal father for his new movement.

According to Bett, Aenesidemus, like Pyrrho, accepted the invariability condition: for this reason he refrained 'from all claims to the effect that things are *by nature* any particular way', being prepared to *deny* that anything is *by nature* any particular way, and at the same time permitting himself forms of *relativized* speech such as 'x is F at time t', 'x is F for y', or 'x is F in circumstances C' which, *qua* relative (or 'ambiguous'), do not purport to specify the real nature of things. Such relativized assertions would qualify in Aenesidemus' own terms as assertions about *appearances*, and appearances would be an object of (a mundane form of) knowledge and, as for Pyrrho, a practical criterion (their scope being extended also to

conventions and social norms). The very existence of multiple ways in which a thing presents itself, ways catalogued carefully in the ‘ten modes’, does not lead to suspension of judgement as to which (if any) of such ways corresponds to the nature of the thing (as it would do in Sextus), but ‘guarantees that *none* of these ways is the way the thing is in its true nature’ (216).

This picture of Aenesidemus’ Pyrrhonism (strongly influenced by Woodruff 1988) is interesting but highly controversial, and I think that not only its details, but its very foundations could be deeply challenged, beginning from Aenesidemus’ alleged acceptance of the invariability condition and his supposed non-Sextan usage of the ten tropes. This task would require and deserve itself a whole review, and thus must be dropped here. What I shall argue is that Aenesidemus’ outlook, if so understood, does not seem to be that bridge between Pyrrho and Sextus that Bett needs for making Pyrrho’s own position understandable in the history of ancient Pyrrhonism: on the one hand, Bett’s Aenesidemus looks *much too similar* to Pyrrho to be a first century BC philosopher; on the other one, he looks *much too different* from Sextus to be the initiator of Pyrrhonism.

Let us begin with exploring the relations between Pyrrho and Aenesidemus. If their analogies are quite evident when one reads the brief account of Aenesidemus furnished above, the only substantial difference the author can present is perplexing: ‘Pyrrho advances the metaphysical thesis that reality is indeterminate, whereas Aenesidemus refuses any attempt to specify the nature of reality’ (214). To begin with, one could ask how it is possible that from the *same* ‘premisses’ (the invariability condition and the phenomenon of variability) Pyrrho infers the indeterminacy thesis, Aenesidemus a refusal to endorse such a thesis: one of them must be mistaken (we shall see shortly that Bett does have an answer, but it does not seem to be the kind of answer we are looking for).

My suggestion is that the proposed difference is mainly verbal: Aenesidemus’ refusal of specifying the nature of things is no less dogmatic than Pyrrho’s metaphysical assertion that the nature of things is indeterminate. For such a refusal consists in denying, for any object x and for a wide range of predicates F , that x is (by nature) F and that x is (by nature) not- F . According to Bett, ‘If someone asked Aenesidemus “What is the nature of things?” he could quite consistently reply “We are in no position to answer that question”’. Why so? To the question ‘What is the nature of x ?’ Aenesidemus should confidently assert ‘ x is not (by nature) F , nor is it (by nature) not- F (nor is it (by nature) F and not- F , nor is it (by nature) neither F nor not- F)’. Thanks to his confident acceptance of the invariability condition, he is in the best position to answer that question: that the answer does not consist in a positive

attribution of a definite nature to x does not mean that he has not specified, in an important sense, the nature of reality. He has said *all* what can be said about the intrinsic nature of reality: that there is no such a thing like a determinate intrinsic nature of reality. If one accepts Aenesidemus' answer, there *cannot* be anything more to say (and to research)¹⁵.

One could object that there is indeed an important difference between Pyrrho and Aenesidemus: for Pyrrho ' x is (by nature) F ' is neither true nor false, for Aenesidemus it is purely false (and for Pyrrho ' x is not (by nature) F ' should be neither true nor false, whereas for Aenesidemus it is certainly true). But such a difference is less substantial than it might look: Bett fails to explain it, but I guess it follows only from Pyrrho's alleged acceptance, and Aenesidemus' non-acceptance, of the particular conception of falseness described on p. 5. However that may be, on the basis of this difference one might think that Pyrrho is somehow *less* dogmatic than Aenesidemus, and not *more* dogmatic.

But let us return to Bett's answer to the question why Pyrrho accepted, and Aenesidemus did not accept, the indeterminacy thesis. Bett argues that the difference can be accounted for by focusing our attention on the different eras in which the two philosophers lived:

In Aenesidemus' day, as opposed to Pyrrho's, it would have seemed thoroughly irresponsible to derive from the phenomenon of variability any positive characterization of the nature of reality, such as that it was indefinite. The Stoics and the Academics had been engaged in a couple of centuries of debate on epistemological issues, in which the legitimacy of claiming to be able to specify how things really are, on the basis of how they strike one ... was central throughout. ... [O]nce the question of the 'criterion of truth' became a question of primary importance, in the Hellenistic period, such bold moves [*scil.* drawing metaphysical consequences from certain types of variability] would naturally have begun to seem suspect; by Aenesidemus' time, they would surely have seemed foolhardy or worse. (221-222)

I fully agree with Bett; but I cannot see why a *positive* characterization of the nature of reality on the basis of phenomenological variability should appear irresponsible or foolhardy, while a *negative* (Aenesidemean) characterization should be decent philosophy: the crux resides in the unwarranted slide from relative phenomena to true reality (and thus in the invariability condition itself), and not in the affirmative or negative nature of its outcomes. According to Bett's own standards, Aenesidemus' outlook, if interpreted as Bett suggests, turns out to be, to say the least, historically suspect.

This leads straight to another thorny question: while Aenesidemus' adoption of Pyrrho as a figurehead becomes only too easy to explain, the transition from Aenesidemus to Sextus, far

from being accountable ‘without too much difficulty’ (239), reveals to be almost intractable. According to Bett, such a transition would have been originated by the later Pyrrhonists’ drop of Aenesidemus’ invariability condition (Agrippa is tentatively suggested as a possible key figure in the transition). It is easy to see why a later Pyrrhonist should have rejected the invariability condition, which is certainly a formidable *dogmatic* thesis: it is far harder to see how such a later Pyrrhonist could have seen himself as a part of a tradition whose most excellent members were ready to endorse that thesis. And not only the invariability condition, but also its philosophical outcomes should have appeared as intolerably dogmatic to a Sextan-style Pyrrhonist: Aenesidemus allows himself to deny as false many things about the intrinsic nature of reality, and to advance as true many objective (though relativized) claims.

More generally, Bett’s reading requires us to believe that Aenesidemus understood most of the key concepts of Pyrrhonism in a way substantially different from Sextus’ own. For example, ἐποχή cannot be a ‘standstill of the intellect, owing to which we *neither deny* nor affirm anything’ (S. E. *PH* 1.10): consequently, all the expressions (φωναί) which are intended to voice such a mental state are to be interpreted as carrying different meanings than in Sextus (Bett is ready to admit this in the case of οὐ(δὲν) μᾶλλον and οὐδὲν ὀρίζω [198-199]). On Bett’s interpretation, the concept of ἰσοσθένεια of conflicting reasons, which is as central as those of ἐποχή and ἀταραξία in Sextus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, was completely extraneous to Aenesidemus’ outlook, as to Pyrrho’s: but the idea that this core of Pyrrhonism might have been introduced so late sounds really odd¹⁶ (and even odder when one thinks that it was a fundamental ingredient already of the skeptical Academy¹⁷). The ten modes of suspension themselves would have had radically different (and indeed incompatible) roles and outcomes in Aenesidemus and Sextus, and the crucial concept of φαίνόμενον would have been subject to diverging interpretations in the initial and terminal phases of Pyrrhonism (234-235).

That such radical changes may have occurred is possible, even if not probable: but that the later Pyrrhonists could have considered themselves as members of Pyrrho’s and Aenesidemus’ tradition, these enormous differences notwithstanding, is arduous to believe (just consider the utter inadequacy of the definition of skepticism in *PH* 1.8-10 as a description of Pyrrho’s and Aenesidemus’ outlook, or think of Sextus’ eagerness in clarifying the differences between his Pyrrhonism and only superficially akin philosophies¹⁸). And even if one wished to concede this, it would be very strange that no sources preserved any clear testimony of this devastating doctrinal earthquake inside the Pyrrhonist tradition, misleadingly presenting this tradition as strongly unitary (after all, we are quite well informed of the

turbulent cases inside the Academy or the Stoa). Bett's claim that 'it would have been surprising if Pyrrhonism had stayed essentially unchanged over some 500 years' (239) is as sensible as indisputable: but that it underwent the *amount* and the *kind* of change Bett suggests seems highly controversial.

Again, controversial, and not impossible; but Bett's avowed aim was to offer a comprehensive interpretation of Pyrrho's outlook, and of his position inside the Pyrrhonist tradition, *more probable* than the competing readings. Bett's conclusion is in fact that his metaphysical interpretation of Pyrrho is more probable, on textual basis, than the epistemological one, and that 'Pyrrho's place in the history of Greek philosophy is accounted for at least as well on this interpretation ... as on others' (240). I tried to suggest just some reasons (out of many possible) for doubting both claims; but this by no means implies that there is a different overall interpretation on the market which can answer convincingly all the questions Bett raises and attempts to solve. Bett's monograph can give a strong impulse to further investigation on the topic: every single page is a deep challenge for any future interpreter who should attempt to shape a different account of Pyrrho, his antecedents and his legacy. Criticize, if you want, but also try to do better yourself.

In conclusion, Bett's book is a very intelligent book, well-documented and for the most part well-argued. Anyone, either student or scholar, who has a genuine interest in skepticism, in its arguments, and its history, ought to run to the nearest library or bookshop, and get Bett's volume: no doubt his understanding of the topic will gain a lot from this challenging reading.

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¹ Italics mine.

² For a review of the evidence on Aristocles' credibility Bett refers the reader to sect. VI of Bett 1994*a*. Given the importance of Aristocles' testimony, perhaps the question would have been worth some discussion (at least an extensive footnote) in the book too.

³ A different 'moral' interpretation of the three adjectives has been advanced in Ausland 1989 and Brunschwig 1994.

⁴ Elsewhere Bett admits that the usage of ἀληθεύειν in our passage is to be attributed to Aristocles himself, and not to Timon (16n7).

⁵ This point had been noted by Brennan (1998, 421-422) in his analysis of Bett 1994*a*, but clearly Bett has not found it impressive enough to devote at least some line to this question.

⁶ The author suggests that there is a text giving the impression of being in tune with the Aristocles' passage, read metaphysically, and that only some unfortunate confusion in the context does not allow us to take the passage (D. L. 9.61) as corroborating evidence for such a reading: οὐδὲν γὰρ <Pyrrho> ἔφασκεν οὐτε καλὸν οὐτ' αἰσχρὸν οὐτε δίκαιον οὐτ' ἄδικον. It is true that 'one would certainly not gather from these words that Pyrrho suspended judgement' (45); but the passage does not seem to imply either that claims like 'x is not just' or 'x is not unjust' are neither true nor false; on the contrary, the apparent implication is that according to Pyrrho such claims were true, and their contradictories ('x is just', 'x is unjust') false.

⁷ However, Bett argues that Cicero's scanty remarks on Pyrrho as a severe moralist and Pyrrho's alleged dogmatic assertions on 'the nature of the divine and the good' (Timon, fr. 68) can be dismissed as inconclusive evidence (94-105).

⁸ Bett suggests that it is possible that the reliance on appearances is an innovation by Timon himself (93).

⁹ Accordingly, Bett dismisses Antigonus of Carystus' story depicting a Pyrrho which takes no precautions in the face of precipices, oncoming wagons, and dangerous dogs, needing to be rescued by the friends who followed him around (D. L. 9.62). Bett suggests that Antigonus 'devises incidents in which Pyrrho literally takes no notice of what his eyes tell him' by irresponsibly building on Timon's remarks that in Pyrrho's view the senses should not be trusted as guides to the intrinsic nature of things (72): 'Antigonus has simply presented what should be (and no doubt originally was) a hostile hypothetical account of what someone who held Pyrrho's position *would* have to do, in order to live consistently with that position, as an actual account of what Pyrrho did do' (68).

Bett's argument is acute, and certainly we cannot take Antigonus' story at face value, as depicting the *everyday* behavior of Pyrrho. But perhaps it is not necessary to dismiss it as a sheer invention either: for example, Pyrrho could have displayed such a behavior only occasionally as an extreme measure (a sort of trial of strength) against adversaries protesting that his adoption of φαivόμενα as a practical guidance betrays his attaching strong value to health and life (and some objective reliability to φαivόμενα themselves). Bett believes that the hypothesis of such 'performances' is unlikely, because they would serve only to show that his philosophical outlook is 'quite obviously self-refuting' (67). But this does not seem correct: risking to fall into a precipice and die to defend one's philosophical position would be a sign of self-refutation if such position promised a *long* life, and not an *unperturbed* life (we would not charge the religion of the early Christians at Nero's time with self-refutation because their coherently witnessing their faith exposed them to the risk of being

devoured by wild beasts in the Coliseum; Christ did not promise a pleasant and safe earthy life, but a blessed and eternal afterlife). In normal circumstances, however, Pyrrho can avoid precipices without charge of inconsistency, because uncommittedly relying on φαivόμενα is part of his outlook (of course one could still ask why Pyrrho decided to adopt such practical criterion).

¹⁰ Bett admits that no sources attribute anything like the invariability condition to Pyrrho.

¹¹ This assumption, ruling out the possibility that we are ‘subject to pervasive or systematic illusion in our everyday encounters with things’ (122) is intended to fill the dangerous gap between the invariability condition, which speaks of things *being* (or not *being*) invariably *F*, and the phenomenon of variability, according to which things *strike us* in variable ways. I am not persuaded that this quasi-Protagorean move is completely successful: if it can be sensible to say that since honey *strikes* healthy people as sweet then it *is* qualifiedly sweet (for healthy people), it seems rather naive the claim that since eating one’s enemies *strikes* cannibals as virtuous then it *is* qualifiedly virtuous (for cannibals), where ‘is qualifiedly’ does *not* mean ‘appears to be’, or ‘is believed to be’, but has some objective (though relativized) import.

¹² Italics mine. See also Bett’s claim that ‘in Pyrrho’s case ... to say that each thing ‘no more is than is not or both is and is not or neither is nor is not’ is to say that, for the predicates under consideration, those predicates neither apply *nor fail to apply* to the things in question’ (214) (italics mine).

¹³ For Plato ‘Forms qualify as truly *being* a certain way, because, unlike the sensible things ..., Forms by definition are whatever they are *without qualification*’ (136).

¹⁴ See Bett 1994*b*.

¹⁵ It is hard to imagine why an Aenesidemean Pyrrhonist should be called ζητητικός (‘investigative’).

¹⁶ It also seems to be contradicted by Anon. in *Theaet.* 61.26-30 and D. L. 9.106 (*pace* Bett 200n20, 115).

¹⁷ One might wonder also how it is possible that the unorthodox Stoic Aristo described his contemporary Arcesilaus as ‘Plato in front, *Pyrrho behind*, Diodorus in the middle’ (or that others said that Arcesilaus emulated Pyrrho [D. L. 4.33]) if Pyrrho has nothing to do with conflicting arguments, ἰσοσθένεια and ἐποχή.

¹⁸ Bett notes that ‘Sextus is ambivalent about Aenesidemus’ status as a sceptic’ (230). But when Sextus does not depict Aenesidemus as an orthodox Pyrrhonist, usually it does so by associating him to Heraclitus: and Heraclitus, according to Sextus, is guilty of inferring from the existence of conflicting appearances the conclusion that ‘contraries actually do hold of the same thing’ (S. E. *PH* 1.210), which is exactly the *opposite* conclusion of that allegedly endorsed by Bett’s Aenesidemus.