

The sources and scope of Cyrenaic skepticism

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on two questions: (I) why do the Cyrenaics deny that we can gain knowledge concerning “external things,” and (II) how wide-ranging is this denial? On the first question, I argue that the Cyrenaics are skeptical because of their contrast between the indubitable grasp we have of our own affections, versus the inaccessibility of external things that cause these affections. Furthermore, this inaccessibility is due to our cognitive and perceptual limitations—it is an epistemological doctrine rooted in their psychology—and not (*pace* Zilioli) due to any metaphysical theses regarding the external world. On the second question, I argue (*pace* Tsouna and Warren) that the scope of the Cyrenaics’ skepticism is quite wide. Our reports on the Cyrenaics are inconsistent, but the most charitable and plausible reading results in attributing to the Cyrenaics skepticism not merely about the *properties* of external things (e.g., that the fire that warms me is really hot) of also of their nature and identity (e.g., that the object that warms me is a fire). However, it does not extend to skepticism regarding the *existence* of an external world.¹

Introduction

Although we possess no primary texts by the Cyrenaics and must rely on later reports to reconstruct their views, these reports firmly establish their epistemological subjectivism and skepticism. On the one hand, my subjective affections (*pathê*, singular *pathos*) are obvious to me, e.g., the sweet sensation when I eat some honey, and I cannot be mistaken about my present affections (Sextus Empiricus *Against the Professors* 7 193-5, Plutarch *Against Colotes* 1120e-f). This doctrine is often reported using the technical

vocabulary that I “grasp” or “apprehend” (*katalambanô*) my *pathê*. This cognitive grasp, however, is confined to what is immediately given in my experience, and the Cyrenaics were infamous for coining locutions such as the person eating honey being “sweetened” or the person seeing a wall being “yellowed,” rather than simply saying that the honey seems sweet or the wall yellow to him, in order to report only this immediate, indubitable content. On the other hand, our *pathê* are not sufficient evidence for judgments about the external objects that produce them (*Against Colotes* 1120d), and when we overstep our present *pathê* and make such judgments we are liable to error (*Against Colotes* 1120f). A *pathos* reveals nothing more than itself (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors* 7 194), and external objects are inapprehensible (*akatalêpton*, Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1 215).

But this still leaves open important questions about what exactly the Cyrenaics’ ‘skepticism’ amounts to. The Cyrenaics assert that we cannot apprehend external objects, and they recommend that we cease making judgments concerning them. But what is the *source* of this skepticism? I explore this question in the first part of this paper and argue that their skepticism is grounded in our limitations as epistemic *subjects*, rather than (as has been argued) being based upon any metaphysical thesis about the nature of the

¹ I would like to thank Ugo Zilioli for his generosity of spirit in inviting me to contribute to this volume after reading my often critical review of his book on the Cyrenaics in *NDPR*, and for sharing with me drafts of his paper and the other papers appearing in this book. Some of the material in this paper in its introduction and discussion of the metaphysical indeterminacy thesis is adapted from that review.

external world as an inapprehensible *object*.² In the second part of the paper, I turn to the question of the *scope* of the Cyrenaics' skepticism. Our sources are inconsistent on this issue. Some report doubt about whether the external world exists at all, others doubt about the identity of objects in the external world, e.g., whether the object that heats me is fire, and others merely doubt about the properties of objects in the external world, e.g., whether the fire that heats me is really hot. I argue that the Cyrenaics are dubious about both the properties and identity of the cause of each particular *pathos*: my being heated has *some* cause, but I cannot grasp whether this cause is really hot or whether it is a fire. I close the paper with a consideration of whether the Cyrenaics' skepticism involves just the identity of particular objects or extends as a global thesis about the structure of the world.

I. *The sources of Cyrenaic skepticism*

Zilioli argues that the Cyrenaics' skepticism is based upon an ambitious metaphysical thesis about the nature of the external world, that it is in constant flux and contains no proper objects with determinate properties. (Zilioli 2012 and 2014b) Let us call the view "metaphysical indeterminacy." I believe that ultimately metaphysical indeterminacy is inconsistent with the reports we have on the Cyrenaics, but I will first spell out what the view is and how it does comport with many of our *testimonia*.

According to Zilioli, the Cyrenaics think that the external world exists "as an indeterminate substratum, made up of no discrete and distinct objects" (Zilioli (2102) 78), which is similar to the metaphysical view of the "subtle thinkers" allied with Protagoras and Heraclitus in *Theaetetus* 156a3-160c who advance a doctrine of radical flux. (Zilioli (2012) 50) The Cyrenaics' restriction of knowledge to our affections is grounded on their view that the external world contains no determinate objects or essences to be grasped by us.

It may seem immediately inconsistent for skeptics like the Cyrenaics to advance an ambitious metaphysical thesis about the world: to maintain both that we cannot grasp the ways things external to us are, and that the external world is an indeterminate substratum containing no distinct objects in constant flux. But this charge is too hasty. As Zilioli notes, to say that the external world has no determinate nature is a peculiar sort of claim, which allows the Cyrenaic on his interpretation to avoid inconsistency. (Zilioli (2012) 84) But before we examine how advancing a positive doctrine of metaphysical indeterminacy can coexist with skepticism, let me discuss a simpler (but pertinent) parallel example.

² A little terminological housekeeping: when I talk about the Cyrenaics' "skepticism," I am referring to their denial that we can apprehend external objects and their recommendation that we eschew making judgments regarding them. For Sextus Empiricus, such a stance is not properly skeptical, since it involves a sort of (negative) epistemological commitment. It is for this reason that Hankinson labels the Cyrenaics as "negative E [i.e., epistemological] dogmatists" (Hankinson (1995) 13-18), although Sextus does not use that terminology. In Zilioli's paper in this volume, he labels the sort of position I endorse as the "sceptical interpretation" because of its stress on our epistemic limitations, which he contrasts with his own "metaphysical indeterminacy" interpretation. These labels are fair enough, but the way I am using terms, both would qualify as skeptical interpretations, as both acknowledge that the Cyrenaics deny we can apprehend external objects, although they differ on the reasons the Cyrenaics do so, and so I label my view the "epistemic limitations" interpretation, while retaining "metaphysical indeterminacy" for Zilioli's view.

Suppose that somebody is a Berkeleyan idealist, holding that only minds and their contents exist. This qualifies as an ambitious metaphysical thesis. But on its basis, one could certainly maintain the skeptical thesis that we cannot grasp the essences of mind-independent physical objects, for the simple reason that no such objects exist to be grasped.³ And in fact, one report in Sextus Empiricus seems to ascribe such a position to the Cyrenaics. In order to argue against musical theory, Sextus makes a case that musical notes don't exist. (This is relevant because notes make up melodies, the subject matter of musical theory.) He writes, "the Cyrenaic philosophers claim that only the *pathê* exist, and nothing else. So, since sound is not a *pathos* but rather something capable of producing a *pathos*, it is not one of the things that exist. To be sure, by denying the existence of every sensory object, the schools of Democritus and of Plato deny the existence of sound as well, as sound is taken to be a sensory object."⁴ (*Against the Professors* 6 53)

Now, we have excellent reason not to trust this report. It is inconsistent with all of our other reports on the Cyrenaics, including other reports in Sextus. As Tsouna notes (Tsouna (1998) 80), whereas elsewhere Sextus is concerned to "present an accurate and detailed outline of Cyrenaic doctrine," here his purpose "is dialectical and consists in attacking the implicit belief of the professors of the art of music in the existence of sound." So accuracy is not an important *desideratum* of the report, and this disregard for accuracy is shown by his sloppy "misconstrual of the positions that he ascribes to Democritus and Plato for the same purpose." (Tsouna (1998) 81) But if the Cyrenaics *did* hold such a position, it would form a solid basis for denying that we can grasp the external things.

Returning to the metaphysical indeterminacy thesis, a similar maneuver defuses the charge of inconsistency against it. According to Zilioli, the Cyrenaics hold that the external world exists, but as something with no determinate essence for us to grasp, or for us to accurately describe as being one way rather than another. He draws a parallel between the Cyrenaics' position and that of Pyrrho of Elis, at least as construed by Richard Bett. (Zilioli (2014b) 000) Bett states, "Pyrrho answered the question, "what is the nature of things?" by saying "things are in themselves indeterminate", and on that basis recommended a withdrawal from all opinions about how things really are that ascribe fixed and definite characteristics to those things."⁵ (Bett (2014) 000) And Bett also correctly notes (*pace* O'Keefe 2013) that somebody holding such a position would avoid, as hopeless, studies that attempt to pin down the way things are, so that the Cyrenaics' refusal to engage in physics because of its uncertainty (*DL* 2 92) does not count against the metaphysical indeterminacy thesis. (Bett (2014) 000).

While the metaphysical indeterminacy thesis is consistent with maintaining that the external world is ungraspable, it cannot be reconciled with the reports we have concerning the particular arguments the Cyrenaics give for skepticism or the way they describe our resultant ignorance. Sextus reports that we all make mistakes regarding the external object and cannot grasp the truth regarding it because "the soul is too weak to

³ Berkeley and his ilk, of course, would typically deny that ordinary physical objects *are* mind-independent, opting instead for some sort of phenomenalist reduction of physical objections to actual or possible patterns of sense-data, but the point about mind-independent physical objects still stands.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are from the appendix to Tsouna (1998).

⁵ Bett (2000) 14-62 contains his arguments for this construal.

distinguish it on account of the places, the distances, the motions, the changes, and numerous other causes” (*Against the Professors* 7 195), firmly placing the responsibility for their skepticism on our epistemic limitations rather than on the nature of the world (or lack thereof).

The Cyrenaics’ skeptical arguments start from noting cases in which an object appears F to one percipient and not-F to another, depending upon the percipients’ condition, e.g., something that appears white to me may seem yellow to a fellow with jaundice and red to a chap with ophthalmia. From such cases, it’s plausible to suppose that an object that isn’t F can appear F to somebody (Sextus Empiricus *Against the Professors* 7 192-3, 197-8). As noted above, our *pathê* are not sufficient evidence for judgments about the external objects that produce them (Plutarch *Against Colotes* 1120d), and when we overstep our present *pathê* and make such judgments we are liable to error (1120f). This is because a *pathos* reveals nothing more than itself, and we have no criterion by which we could judge which of the conflicting claims regarding the objects is true (Sextus Empiricus *Against the Professors* 7 194-5).

So, say the Cyrenaics, we sense only that we are affected in a certain way, and we do not know whether something has a particular color or sound. (Cicero *Lucullus* 76) When we are burnt or cut, we know we’re undergoing something but cannot tell whether what is burning us is fire or cutting us is iron. (Aristocles, quoted by Eusebius, *Preparation for the Gospel* 14.19.1) The Cyrenaics do not merely assert that we cannot grasp the essence of things—which could be squared with the view that things have no such essence to be grasped. Instead, they say that we cannot know *whether or not* the object really is the way it appears to us. That leaves open the possibility that the object burning us is really hot, or is really a fire—and this possibility cannot be squared with the metaphysical indeterminacy interpretation. If the Cyrenaics were committed to the thesis that no objects such as fires exist, they could know that the feeling of hot was not caused by a fire.

Since the metaphysical indeterminacy interpretation is inconsistent with the fullest reports we have on the Cyrenaics’ position, we should be loathe to accept it absent powerful countervailing considerations. But the evidence in its favor is thin. Zilioli (2014b) mentions several passages to support it.

The first is the passage from Sextus about the non-existence of sounds discussed above. On its face, it does not support the metaphysical indeterminacy interpretation, as it denies that anything other than the *pathê* exist, rather than asserting that the external world exists but as something indeterminate. Zilioli, however, reads it as asserting that “sound does not *properly* exist” (emphasis mine; Zilioli (2014b) 000), presumably meaning that sound (alongside everything other than the *pathê*) does not exist as a proper or determinate being, while allowing that it exists indeterminately. But there is nothing in the context of this passage to indicate that *hyparchein* is being used in some sense analogous to the way Plato uses *einai* when discussing the lovers and sights and sounds and the objects of knowledge and opinion. And so we should retain the straightforward reading of the report as denying that anything other than the *pathê* exists, and we should disregard it for the reasons Tsouna gives.

The second passage is Sextus *Against the Professors* 7 193-4, which Tsouna translates: “Hence, if one must speak the truth, only the *pathos* is actually a *phainomenon* [i.e., something apparent] to us. But what is external and productive of the *pathos* perhaps

exists (*tacha estin on*), but it is not a *phainomenon* to us.” As with the first passage, Zilioli reads this in terms of types of existence, rather than existence *tout court*. He translates the second sentence “What is external and productive of the affection perhaps is a being, but it is not a *phainomenon* for us,” and he goes on to say, “This means that things in the world ... perhaps are not proper material beings, perhaps they are nothing that is ontologically determinate.” (Zilioli (2014b) 000) Again, I am suspicious of reading the passage as doubting a certain *type* of existence. But even if we grant Zilioli this point, this passage does not support the metaphysical indeterminacy thesis, as in it the Cyrenaics are asserting that we *cannot know* about the being of external things, rather than asserting that external things *are not* proper beings.⁶

The final passage is a badly damaged Herculaneum papyrus (probably by the Epicurean Philodemus) discussing the ethics of some philosophers, most likely the Cyrenaics. After mentioning some people who deny that that it is possible to know anything, and others who have selected the *pathê* of the soul as the ends of action, Philodemus goes on to say, “And yet others held the doctrine that what our school calls grief and joy are totally empty notions because of the manifest indeterminacy (*aoristia*) of things...” Zilioli takes this an explicit attribution of the metaphysical indeterminacy thesis to the Cyrenaics. (Zilioli (2014b) 000) But as Bett points out (Bett (2014) 000 n. 42), the indeterminacy view is attributed to “others,” so Philodemus here may not be referring to the Cyrenaics. And even if he is, I think that, absent further context, the claim that “things are indeterminate” can with equal plausibility be read as making either a metaphysical claim (“Things in themselves have no determinations”) or an epistemological one (“We are unable to determine how things are”).⁷

II. *The scope of Cyrenaic skepticism*

So, I think we have excellent grounds for accepting the epistemic limitations interpretation and rejecting the metaphysical indeterminacy interpretation. But this still leaves open the scope of the Cyrenaics’ skepticism. Let us imagine that a Cyrenaic accidentally puts his hand into a fire and burns it. He can apprehend his own *pathos*, that he is being burnt, while he refrains from making judgments about the external object that causes the affection. But how radical is his skepticism? We can distinguish three types:

- *Object property skepticism*. The Cyrenaic refrains from judging that the fire that burns him is really hot. (And likewise, that the honey he tastes is really sweet, and the wall he sees really red.)

⁶ Similar considerations apply to Zilioli’s discussion of *Against Colotes* on pp. 000.

⁷ See chapter 3 of Zilioli (2012) for his arguments that Aristippus and other early Cyrenaics were the subtle thinkers who advanced the flux doctrine of the *Theaetetus*, and O’Keefe (2013) for my criticisms. Briefly: while the Cyrenaics and the subtle thinkers each characterize our infallible acquaintance with our *pathê* similarly, this on its own gives us little reason to attribute the metaphysical doctrine of flux to Aristippus, especially if (as I have argued) this doctrine conflicts with the reports we have on the Cyrenaics. In this volume, Rowe argues that Aristippus is the unnamed source of many of the ideas advanced (and then criticized) in the *Theaetetus*, although not the metaphysics of flux.

- *Object identity skepticism.* The Cyrenaic refrains from judging that the object that burns him is a fire. (And likewise, that the thing that sweetens him is honey, or the thing that reddens him a wall.)
- *External world skepticism.* The Cyrenaic refrains from judging that there is any object external to him that burns him (and likewise for cases of his being sweetened or reddened).

Against external world skepticism

Unfortunately, the *testimonia* on the Cyrenaics point in different directions on this issue, with passages supporting each type of skepticism. Still, we can quickly rule out external world skepticism. In its support there is a single report in Sextus Empiricus on the Cyrenaics, which we have already mentioned in connection with the metaphysical indeterminacy interpretation: “Hence, if one must speak the truth, only the *pathos* is actually a *phainomenon* to us. But what is external and productive of the *pathos* perhaps exists (*tacha estin on*), but it is not a *phainomenon* to us.” (Sextus Empiricus *Against the Professors* 7 193-4) This seems to raise the possibility that the external cause of the *pathos* may not even exist. But all of the other reports on the Cyrenaics have them thinking that our *pathê* have *some* sort of external cause, so we should be suspicious of this report and opt to explain away the appearance of external world skepticism if we have a plausible way of doing so.⁸

Tsouna’s analysis of the passage (Tsouna (1998) 54-61) is convincing: the talk about what is *phainomenon* to us is distinctive to Pyrrhonian skepticism, not the Cyrenaics. So we should think that this passage is a skeptical interpretation and not a faithful reporting of the Cyrenaics’ views, as Sextus blurs the distinction between the *pathê* for the Cyrenaics and the skeptical *phainomena*.⁹ She also notes that even if we think that Sextus’ report can be attributed to the Cyrenaics, it need not express a doubt about the existence of the external world. Instead, it can be read as a “dialectical concession: let us admit for the sake of the argument that the external cause of the *pathos* exists, even so, it is not a *phainomenon* to us.” (Tsouna (1998) 78)

For object property skepticism

This leaves us to decide between object property skepticism and object identity skepticism. Tsouna and Warren give a number of considerations in favor of restricting the Cyrenaics’ skepticism merely to the properties of objects. Tsouna notes (Tsouna (1998) 75-6) that the Cyrenaics sometimes use common nouns to denote the external objects that are the cause of my *pathê*, e.g., they speak of the fire that burns me (Anonymous commentator on Plato’s *Theaetetus* 152b col. 65-29.39), the honey which sweetens me,

⁸ We have no reports on why the Cyrenaics think this, but Tsouna plausibly speculates that the Cyrenaics “may presuppose the use of some version of the causality principle: if I am feeling burnt, there is something over there which is burning me.” (Tsouna (1998) 77 n. 5) See also Burnyeat (1982) more generally on (the absence of) idealism as a live option in ancient philosophy.

⁹ See O’Keefe (2011) for more on how these things differ. Hankinson (1995) 58 also thinks that the “genuine skepticism of [this passage] is a Sextan intrusion.”

and the young olive shoots which bitter me (Plutarch *Against Colotes* 1120e). Tsouna writes, “Such passages indicate that that the Cyrenaics conceived of the ontological structure of external reality in a fairly conventional way: what they questioned was not whether things or classes of things in the world exist, but only whether they have the properties that an individual perceiver may attribute to them.” (Tsouna (1998) 76) Similarly, Warren claims that the report “it is non-evident whether the fire is such as to burn” by the anonymous commentator “explicitly rules out” object identity skepticism. (Warren (2013) 415)

On the other hand, the Cyrenaics often refer to the causes of our *pathê* in much vaguer and non-committal terms. Tsouna usefully catalogs these. (Tsouna (1998) 76-7) Sometimes they indicate that that these causes are external things in some general manner but shy away from labeling them with the names of particular objects, instead talking about “the external objects” (*ta ektos hupokeimena*, Sextus *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.215) or “the things outside” (*ta exôthen*, Anonymous 65.31-2). Other times the external objects are characterized entirely by their effect on the percipient, e.g., “that which is burning us” (*ta kaion*, Eusebius 14.19.1). Such passages may seem to point toward the Cyrenaics eschewing judgments about the identity of external objects, but Warren rightly resists this implication. These indeterminate expressions, he writes, are just “an expositional convenience” to explain the Cyrenaics’ claims in broad terms that can be filled in later with specific items (like the fire that burns me), and we shouldn’t take them as committing them to a significant philosophical position. (Warren (2013) 415)

But two passages do explicitly commit the Cyrenaics to object identity skepticism. Colotes the Epicurean, as reported by Plutarch, says that the Cyrenaics would refuse to say that there is a man or a horse or a wall, but instead assert that they’re being walled or horsed or manned. (*Against Colotes* 1120d) And Aristocles the Peripatetic, as quoted by Eusebius, says that the Cyrenaics, when they’re being burnt or cut, know that they’re undergoing something but cannot tell whether the thing that is burning them is fire or the thing that is cutting them is iron. (Eusebius *Preparation for the Gospel* 14.19.1)

Given these conflicting reports, Warren claims that on grounds of charity we ought to favor those that ascribe to the Cyrenaics a limited object property skepticism and disregard those that commit them to an object identity skepticism. That’s because the wider skepticism would leave them open to the *apraxia* objection—that their doctrines would make it impossible to act and live—whereas on the more limited property skepticism, they have the epistemic resources to get by. As Warren puts it, a Cyrenaic might “feel that his commitment to there being an external world populated by various external objects including, for example, a wall in front of him at the moment, would allow him sufficient grounds for living a life even though he will not affirm for sure that the wall is, for example, rough or painted red.” (Warren (2013) 414)

The *apraxia* objection also allows us to explain, and explain away, the reports committing them to object identity skepticism. Both Colotes and Aristocles wish to paint the Cyrenaics in the least flattering light by exaggerating their skepticism and its unpalatable consequences. (Warren (2013) 416) We have further reason to doubt the accuracy of Colotes’ report—Plutarch reprimands Colotes for satirizing the Cyrenaics with his mocking coinages like “I am horsed” and “I am walled.” They never said such things, reports Plutarch, instead confining themselves to locutions like being sweetened,

chilled, and warmed. (*Against Colotes* 1120de, noted in Warren (2013) 416 and Tsouna (1998) 86-7)

For object identity skepticism

Despite the arguments above, I think that ascribing object identity skepticism to the Cyrenaics is both more charitable and more in accord with the reports we have on them. That is because (i) it is unclear that object property skepticism fares any better than object identity skepticism with regard to *apraxia* objections; (ii) restricting their skepticism only to objects' properties is unjustifiable; (iii) restricting their skepticism only to objects' properties is inconsistent with the arguments the Cyrenaics give for their skepticism; (iv) the reports that Tsouna and Warren take to support a limited skepticism can be accommodated within object identity skepticism, so object identity skepticism requires us to reject or explain away fewer of our reports. Let me present my arguments for (i)-(iii) first, as they hang together, and then turn to (iv).

Warren claims that the Cyrenaic can live his life well enough by knowing, at least, that there is an external world populated by objects such as the wall in front of him at that moment, even if he cannot affirm that it has properties such as being rough or being red. But what *can* the Cyrenaic know about the wall in front of him? If, for *every single* property F that the wall appears to me to have, I can know only that the wall moves me F-ly, and not that the wall itself is F, it's unclear what useful information I have about the wall that allows me to act.

Perhaps what Warren has in mind is that I can grasp infallibly only my own *pathê*, and I have no idea what *sensible* properties objects have (such as the wall being red or the honey sweet), but on the basis of my *pathê* I, somehow, have reason to infer other things about the external world and the things around me right now—e.g., that the object in front of me is a wall, that it's solid, and that it's about five feet in front of me. And this gives me reason to act—e.g., to stop running so that I don't slam into it and break my nose.

I can imagine an epistemological position of this sort, but I do not think it can be ascribed to the Cyrenaics. Consider the following report on the Cyrenaics—a sympathetic one, where there seems to be no motive for exaggerating the extent of their skepticism:

What do you think of the Cyrenaics, by no means contemptible philosophers? They deny that there is anything that can be perceived from the outside: the only things that they do perceive are those which they sense by internal touch, for instance pain or pleasure, and they do not know whether something has a particular color or sound, but only sense that they are themselves affected in a certain way. (Cicero, *Lucullus* 76)

Cicero here does not explicitly ascribe to the Cyrenaics a wider object identity skepticism. But he does say that, for the Cyrenaics, we perceive only our own *pathê*—particular pleasures, pains, colors, tastes, etc.—and nothing external to ourselves. Plutarch characterizes the Cyrenaics as “shut[ting] themselves up within their *pathê* as in a state of siege.” (*Against Colotes* 1120d) These reports don't comport with a modest skepticism merely about sensible properties but which allows a wide range of justified beliefs concerning other properties of external objects.

Plutarch does criticize Colotes for mischaracterizing the Cyrenaics with his satirical coinages like “being walled” rather than sticking to their actual terminology of “being reddened” and the like, but he admits that the philosophical point that Colotes is making with those coinages—that the Cyrenaics cannot affirm that there are horses, men, or walls in front of them—is correct. (*Against Colotes* 1120d) And it’s easy to see why. If all we have cognitive access to are our own *pathê*, and these *pathê* reveal to us nothing about the properties of their causes, then we have no information to use by which we could judge what sorts of items in the external world—horses, men, or walls—are causing our *pathê*.

And this is not some *recherché* point that would be noticed only by critics of the Cyrenaics. It’s already front and center in their own skeptical arguments. According to these arguments, it’s not just that the same horse may appear white to me but yellow to a chap with jaundice, but that, on the basis of my *pathê*, it may appear to me that there is a horse out there, while to another person it may look like it’s a cow, and we’d have no basis to judge which (if either) of our opinions is accurate. The Cyrenaics themselves raise the example of a madman who sees an object like the sun doubled (Sextus Empiricus *Against the Professors* 7 192-3), and around the time of the Cyrenaics Epicurus mentions the case of Orestes, who thinks that the Furies are pursuing him when there were really no solid bodies out there causing his sensations (Sextus Empiricus *Against the Professors* 13 63).¹⁰ So, the Cyrenaics are far from thinking that I can at least have some confidence that there is a solid wall in front of me, although maybe not that it is red. The Cyrenaics’ arguments imply, and would have been seen by them to imply, that I should not judge e.g., that there are two objects in front of me, although it appears that there are two, or that the object in front of me is a solid body, although it seems like it is.

Let’s return to Plutarch’s famous simile of the Cyrenaics as shut up inside their *pathê*. It occurs in Plutarch’s own introduction to the views of the Cyrenaics, prior to discussing Colotes’ *apraxia* objection against the Cyrenaics. Plutarch says,

[The Cyrenaics], placing all *pathê* and all sense-impressions within themselves, believed that the evidence coming from them is not sufficient regarding assertions about external objects. Instead, distancing themselves from external objects, they shut themselves up within their *pathê* as in a state of siege, using the formula ‘it appears’ but refusing to affirm in addition that ‘it is’ with regard to external objects. (*Against Colotes* 1120c-d)

The most natural way to read this passage, especially given Plutarch’s assertion that the Cyrenaics distance themselves from external objects and shut themselves up inside their *pathê*, is that the Cyrenaics believe that the *pathê* give insufficient evidence regarding assertions about external objects *tout court*. While it’s possible for claims of this sort to have an implicit scope restriction, in this case I think it would be strained to read Plutarch as attributing to the Cyrenaics merely that “the evidence coming from the *pathê* is not sufficient regarding assertions about [the sensible properties of] external objects.”

So on grounds of charity, I think we should ascribe a wider object identity skepticism to the Cyrenaics, since restricting their skepticism merely to the properties of objects would be unjustifiable given their other well-attested commitments. And if our

¹⁰ For Epicurus himself, Orestes’ delusional perceptions themselves are nonetheless true, insofar as his senses were moved by something existent, and it’s only his judgment that the Furies are solid bodies that’s false.

reports on the Cyrenaics were inconsistent, it would be preferable to reject or explain away those that commit them to merely to object property skepticism. But as a matter of fact, those reports give, at best, only weak support to a restricted skepticism. Those two reports are:

[The Cyrenaics] say we are being sweetened and bittered and chilled and warmed and illuminated and darkened, each of these *pathê* having within itself its own evidence, which is intrinsic to it and irreversible. But whether the honey is sweet or the young olive-shoot bitter or the hail chilly or the unmixed wine warm or the sun luminous or the night air dark, is contested by many witnesses, [wild] animals and domesticated animals and humans alike, for some dislike honey, others like olive-shoots or are burned off by hail or are chilled by the wine or go blind in the sunshine and see well at night. (*Against Colotes* 1120e)

[T]he Cyrenaics claim that the *pathê* alone are apprehensible but the external object is inapprehensible, for, they say, I apprehend that I am being burnt, but it is non-evident whether the fire is such as to burn. (Anonymous commentator on Plato's *Theaetetus* p. 152b col. 65.29-39)

The first thing to note is that, *pace* Warren, the passage from the anonymous commentator does not explicitly rule out object identity skepticism. Let us suppose that object identity skepticism is true and I cannot tell whether or not the object that burns me is a fire. Then the statement “the fire is such as to burn” is *also* going to be something that isn't evident to me—after all, it isn't even evident to me whether the object is a fire, much less whether it is such as to burn! Likewise with the report from Plutarch: object identity skepticism is perfectly compatible with being unable to tell whether or not the honey is sweet, the hail chilly, etc. At best, a statement like “We cannot know whether or not the fire is such as to burn” conversationally implicates that there is an object, the fire, whose nature we cannot know; it does not entail it.

But I don't think that in this context there is much if any conversational implicature of this sort going on. A parallel case from the Pyrrhonian skeptics will help us see why. The skeptic lives his life in accordance with the way things appear to him, e.g., that the honey appears sweet. But unlike the *pathê* for the Cyrenaics, statements about appearances (*phainomena*) are usually a matter of describing how the *object* seems to be, not merely the internal states of the percipient. As Hankinson puts it, “When Sextus does wish to refer to purely mental phenomena, he employs the language of impression, *phantasia* (see [*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1 19]), and *phantasiai* are caused by the *phainomena*, which are their intentional objects. An appearance, then, is not something we have of objects: it is something that objects themselves have (as I might compliment you upon your appearance).” (Hankinson (1995) 25)

Everson (1991) believes that these “objective appearances” commit the Pyrrhonian skeptic to the existence of objects like the honey: I may wonder whether the honey *is* as it *appears* to be, but to believe that the honey appears sweet presupposes that the honey exists. But Gail Fine points out that these statements require only an “ostensible object.” She gives the example of Macbeth saying that the dagger's handle seems to be pointed toward his hand, while still doubting that there really is a dagger

there. Likewise, the Cyrenaic is free to talk about the properties that an object like fire seems to have, while still being dubious about whether the thing he's perceiving really is a fire. (Fine (2003) 350-1)

I think that these determinate ways of referring to the causes of our *pathê* are, as Warren puts, merely "an expositional convenience." When initially setting out skeptical arguments from perceptual relativity, it is more vivid to use concrete examples like the wine that is warming to one person and cooling to another. This also lets the Cyrenaics make their point that that is only the *pathê* of being warmed, cooled, bittered, etc., that we can apprehend, and not the corresponding sensible properties of the objects—their warmth, coolness, or bitterness. Once this central epistemological point is appreciated, however, they can note that their arguments also call into question the identity of the objects that move us—that we cannot tell whether the object that burns us is fire, or the one that cuts us iron.

Global object identity skepticism

My argument so far, if it is successful, shows that the Cyrenaics' skepticism extends to the identity of the particular objects that cause our particular *pathê*. That is, for any particular *pathos*, let us say of sweetness, the Cyrenaic refrains from judging not only that the honey he tastes is sweet, but also from judging that the object causing his *pathos* is honey. But this leaves open the question of whether this object identity skepticism extends to the structure of the world in general. That is, do the Cyrenaics believe in a common-sense way that the world is populated by objects like fires, honey, and so forth, or do they countenance the possibility that reality may well be some sort of indeterminate substratum in constant flux, containing no proper objects, even though (*pace* Zilioli) they would not *subscribe* to that view?

I believe that we should remain agnostic about this final question, given our lack of evidence. As I indicated above, the mere fact that the Cyrenaics sometimes designate the causes of our *pathê* using common nouns like honey, fire, and olive-shoots does not commit them to the existence of such items. Likewise, Warren is right that the more non-committal ways that the Cyrenaics describe these causes, although it is *compatible* with a wider skepticism about their identity, doesn't entail such skepticism.

Hankinson thinks Sextus' report in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1 215 regarding how Pyrrhonian skeptics differ from Cyrenaics precludes a global object skepticism. He first gives the passage: "Furthermore, while we suspend judgment in regard to the essence (*logos*) of external objects, the Cyrenaics assert that they have a nature which is inapprehensible (*akatalêpton*)," and he then writes that the Cyrenaics apparently "combine a general dogmatic ontological claim ('objects have essences') with negative E-dogmatism about them taken as particulars ('we can never know what those essences are')." (Hankinson (1995) 57) So the contrast between the Pyrrhonians and the Cyrenaics, on Hankinson's reading, involves the Cyrenaics making a judgment about the general structure of reality that the Pyrrhonians eschew.

But this is not the only plausible reading of the passage. Tsouna's translation of it runs "Besides, we suspend judgment about the external objects, as far as the arguments go. The Cyrenaics, on the other hand, affirm that the external objects have an inapprehensible nature." As far as the Greek goes, either translation is fine. Tsouna's translation suggests, although it does not require, that the difference between the

Cyrenaics and the Pyrrhonian skeptics is epistemological, not ontological. That is, neither the Pyrrhonian nor the Cyrenaic makes claims about the nature of things, but the Cyrenaic goes on to say that external objects “have an inapprehensible nature,” i.e., that we are unable ever to apprehend their nature, unlike the Pyrrhonian. The contrast, then, would be the same as the one Sextus makes at the start of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* between the skeptic and Academics like Carneades: the skeptic continues investigating, with no opinions of his own either about the subject of his investigation *or* about whether the investigation will be successful, whereas the Academics assert that things cannot be apprehended. (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1 1-3)

On the other hand, a passage that would support attributing global object identity skepticism to the Cyrenaics is *Against the Professors* 7 194, if we accept Zilioli’s reading of what’s going on. Recall that Zilioli takes Sextus to be attributing to the Cyrenaics the thesis that the cause of our *pathos* “perhaps is a being” [*tacha men estin on*], which means that these causes “perhaps are not proper material beings, perhaps they are nothing that is ontologically determinate.” This reading has two troubles, though. First, as Tsouna explains, we have good reason to be suspicious of the accuracy of this report. Secondly, absent some surrounding context to establish that being is used in a technical sense to contrast proper beings with processes, indeterminate substrates, or whatever, the more natural way to read the passage is as asserting that these causes perhaps exist.

So no texts bear much weight in determining whether or not the Cyrenaics subscribed to global object identity skepticism. Considerations of charity likewise do not get us far. One could try to argue as follows: the Cyrenaics subscribe to object identity skepticism about the particular cause of each particular *pathos*. Furthermore, they were probably aware of the possibility that the external world is metaphysically indeterminate, with no proper objects, as this thesis had been put forward in the *Theaetetus* and (perhaps) by Pyrrho. Given this, and their further thesis that we apprehend only our *pathê*, they would have no justification for thinking that our commonsense view of the world is true rather than the metaphysical indeterminacy thesis, and they should have subscribed to global object identity skepticism.

Perhaps. On the other hand, the metaphysical indeterminacy thesis is strange enough that I can imagine somebody rejecting it as incoherent or self-contradictory without claiming to know the determinate properties or identity of any particular objects in the world. And in any case, we have no textual evidence that the Cyrenaics concerned themselves with this issue. The *testimonia* allow us to answer, though not definitively, many of our questions concerning the Cyrenaics’ skepticism, but on this question we should suspend judgment.

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