

Journal of Buddhist Ethics  
ISSN 1076-9005  
<http://www.buddhistethics.org/>  
Volume 17, 2010

## *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism*

Reviewed by Kristian Urstad

Nicola Valley Institute of Technology  
[kristianurstad@hotmail.com](mailto:kristianurstad@hotmail.com)

*Copyright Notice:* Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to:  
[editor@buddhistethics.org](mailto:editor@buddhistethics.org)

# A Review of *Pyrrhonism*:

## *How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism*

Kristian Urstad<sup>1</sup>

*Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism*. By Adrian Kuzminski. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008, 170 pages, ISBN: 978-0739125069 (hardcover), US\$65.00.

Adrian Kuzminski's book is a work of comparative philosophy. It examines Pyrrhonism in terms of its connection and similarity to some Eastern non-dogmatic soteriological traditions, in particular, to Madhyamaka Buddhism. An important part of the author's objective is to examine the historical evidence supporting Pyrrhonism's origins in Indian Buddhism and to gain a more nuanced understanding of both these philosophical and religious traditions.

Kuzminski's aim in the first chapter is to dispel the confusion between Pyrrhonism—a wholly separate tradition onto itself, he claims—and the scepticism of the so-called Middle or New Academy, whose lineage Sextus Empiricus (Pyrrhonism's principal surviving author and Kuzminski's primary source) traces back to the likes of Carneades and Arcesilaus, both members of Plato's Academy in Athens, and which goes on to include later figures like Cicero. Pyrrhonism, Kuzminski claims, is a practice, a distinct way of life, developed by a line of Ancient Greek philosophers, beginning with Pyrrho of Elis at the end of the fourth century BCE, and continuing through to Sextus Empiricus, who lived in the second century CE.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nicola Valley Institute of Technology. Email: kristianurstad@hotmail.com

The author argues that there are several features that distinguish Academic skepticism from Pyrrhonism. Unlike Academic skeptics, Pyrrhonists do not question or doubt *all* assertions, those concerning both evident (involuntary sensations and thoughts) and non-evident matters (beliefs we have *about* such experiences). Non-Pyrrhonist skeptics make doubt absolute and indiscriminate, making the denial of everything imminent (a kind of nihilistic negative dogmatism that claims we can know nothing at all), while Pyrrhonists, Kuzminski claims, suspend belief with respect to non-evident claims (and so remain inconclusive), but embrace and respond to the world of immediate experience (and reasonable inferences from these to other appearances equally evident or direct). A further and related difference between the two camps, Kuzminski argues, is the degree to which the Pyrrhonists go (i.e., further than the Academics) in their search or attainment for peace of mind or tranquility, which they call *ataraxia*. Liberated from dogmatic views, with nothing to assert or deny, and content to live off of immediate experience, Pyrrhonists find themselves open to tranquility. The Academics, on the other hand, are not only never removed from the burden of defending some non-evident dogmatic belief, but they recoil in fear from what they see as the apparent uncertainty of immediate experience—clearly not conditions conducive to an anxiety-free state, Kuzminski contends.

The author claims (and argues more fully in chapter two) that Pyrrho of Elis, whom later Pyrrhonists took as their progenitor, likely developed his philosophy in conversation with Indian sages, after having accompanied Alexander the Great on his conquests to India in the fourth century BCE. More precisely, Kuzminski locates Pyrrho's Indian inspirations in Madhyamaka Buddhism, inspirations he sees as nearly identical with that outlook. They are taken to be congruent in the following important ways. Both argue for the suspension of judgment about non-evident matters, both accept the immediate and involuntary evidence of the senses and thoughts, and both advocate as their goal, or consequent

experience of this, a kind of liberation from attachments, release from suffering or tranquility.

In chapter two, Kuzminski argues that by comparing the principal Pyrrhonian texts with those of the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism, a very plausible case can be made for the latter's influence on the former. Before he sets out to map this common ground however, he briefly discusses the history of the contact between Greeks and Indians, and, in particular, between Pyrrho and certain Indian sages. The only source for any evidence of personal contact between the latter pair is Diogenes Laertius, a biographer of Greek philosophers, who was writing in the early third century CE. Diogenes begins this short passage (which Kuzminski quotes in full) with the following: "Afterwards he (Pyrrho) joined Anaxarchus (an older contemporary), whom he accompanied on his travels everywhere so that he even forgathered with the Indian Gymnosophists and with the Magi. This led him to adopt a most notable philosophy..." (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Vol. 2, trans. R. D. Hicks). Kuzminski claims that Diogenes's ascription of Pyrrho being led to adopt his "most notable philosophy" after this contact, along with this emphasis (previously mentioned) by certain schools in India on suspending belief as a prerequisite for liberation, suggests that a closer investigation into the Indian connection might be enlightening for both Pyrrhonism and South Asian thought.

In support of his view of the similarities between Pyrrhonism and Indian Buddhism, the author first turns to Everard Flintoff's notable 1980 article "Pyrrho and India" which makes a strong case for the importance of Indian influences on Pyrrho. Of relevance is Flintoff's observation of the similarity between Pyrrho's suspension of judgment and the Buddha's refusal to condone beliefs about the nature of things, including his insistence that such beliefs were to be neither affirmed nor denied. Flintoff also emphasizes that in both Pyrrhonian skepticism and Buddhism,

some kind of liberation from suffering is the goal, where this is attained by resisting assent to dogmatic beliefs, whether affirmative or negative, which go beyond what is self-evident, our immediate experience. Flintoff also finds the Pyrrhonists and Buddhists to share common ground with respect to the purpose or aim of their techniques of disputation. Unlike Greek philosophers, who used many dialectical techniques in order to counter the arguments of, or win victory over, their opponents, Pyrrhonists, like Buddhists, used them for the purpose of suspending beliefs, and ultimately as a means to liberation. Finally, following Flintoff, Kuzminski claims that there is no evidence that any other Greek philosopher before Pyrrho used the term *ataraxia* in anything like the Pyrrhonist sense. *Ataraxia* for the Pyrrhonists is not simply a kind of cheerfulness that accompanies the adoption of various beliefs or certain “correct” dogmatic beliefs, but is rather a kind of special tranquility which follows only from suspending or having no beliefs at all. Kuzminski states that *ataraxia* (understood in this way) was made explicit in Greek thought by Pyrrho, but existed early on—indeed, was a common phenomenon—in India among Buddhists and other non-dogmatic soteriological schools.

The author goes on to expand further the points of similarity between Madhyamaka Buddhism and Pyrrhonism. He argues that, between them, there are important points of agreement in five key areas: method, belief, suspension of judgment, tranquility and appearances. With respect to method, both the Madhyamaka (according to Candrakīrti’s *The Entry into the Middle Way*) and Pyrrhonism (according to Sextus Empiricus) test dogmatic assertions—any claims which move beyond the immediate and involuntary evidence of the senses to say something about the hidden nature of appearances or reified concepts—by setting out the oppositions and contradictions involved in them. Both take this to lead to suspension of judgment, with the final result of peaceful liberation. They also, according to Kuzminski, share the same attitude towards beliefs. They both, that is, refuse to accept beliefs in some kind of reality ly-

ing beyond and governing our appearances that explains what those appearances really are. Suspension of judgment marks a third area of similarity. What Pyrrhonists call *epoché* (suspension of judgment) is paralleled by what the Madhyamaka understand as recognition of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Kuzminski claims that central to both is their insistence that the disbandment of belief be not a simple denial, in which A turns into non-A, but a suspension of judgment, in which both A and non-A are equivalently suspended, leaving the agent in a non-committed state. Both schools also share a similar understanding of tranquility. They both take belief, some determination of the nature and value of things, to produce doubt and vulnerability, and therefore anxiety, because it is inherently unstable. Tranquility, rather, follows from the apparent indeterminacy of all things. Kuzminski claims that ‘tranquility’ (*ataraxia*) can be recognized under a variety of names in the Indian traditions (*nirvāṇa*, *samādhi*, *mokṣa*). The last major point of agreement concerns appearances. Pyrrhonism and the Madhyamaka both take appearances to be self-evident, but without any underlying substance, essence or nature. They each suspend judgment about anything beyond the level of appearances, and submit to the stream of daily phenomena, from which they take liberation to follow.

In chapter three, Kuzminski undertakes to give greater clarification to the “evident” and “non-evident” in Pyrrhonism and Buddhism (but primarily in the former). Unlike the majority of Greek philosophers and most of their mainstream successors in Western philosophy, Pyrrhonists did not presume that abstract entities of some sort (concepts, forms, essences) constitute the reality of appearances, which otherwise are no more than fleeting, unstable or chaotic ephemera. For Pyrrhonists, Kuzminski claims, appearances do have a face value, some kind of reliably distinguishing character directly open to consciousness. Pyrrhonists start with such appearances themselves, rather than with other

non-evident factors, and take it (the apparent) as their sole criterion of action.

Another important feature of appearances, according to the author's reading of Sextus, is their involuntary nature. One finds oneself neither embracing nor rejecting immediate appearances, but "yielding without adherence" (quoting Sextus). Moreover, appearances belong to *pathe*. The Greek *pathos* refers to an experience or undergoing on behalf of a subject, of enduring a change one cannot evade or resist. As such, it includes not only our sensations (of the five senses), but also our thoughts. Thoughts too are passive appearances to which we must give assent just as much as we do our sensations. So just as we continue to have sensations, we continue to have thoughts, even though judgments about each, according to the Pyrrhonists, are to be suspended. Kuzminski finds a Buddhist parallel to Pyrrhonist appearances in their own classification or inventory of experience, the aggregates (*skandhas*), a parallel he goes on to describe in more detail.

Kuzminski concludes this chapter with a brief discussion on the kind of life anyone seeking to follow these non-dogmatic practices could lead, given their distinction between the evident, or appearances, and the non-evident. Drawing on Sextus, the author argues that the Pyrrhonist will act in accordance with his experience of appearances, and not in accordance with his beliefs about those appearances; his life is informed by spontaneous reaction to experience, not by beliefs or judgments about that experience. So what, Kuzminski asks, would a Pyrrhonist do in the face of a totalitarian regime such as the Soviet Union or Nazi Germany, or in the face of human injustice and corruption more generally? Without a belief in the "dictatorship of the proletariat" or the "master race" or the "free market," he, suspending all such concepts, would use none of them as a criterion of action. Rather, he would act out of direct experience, i.e., he would react to the involuntary sensory aspects

around him. In the absence of any rationalizing dogmatic beliefs about the kinds of activities going on around him, presumably all that would remain for him is revulsion or disgust. This, it is expected, is sufficient for him to turn away from such acts and regimes or even resist them. As such, it is claimed that there is nothing passive or paralyzing about the Pyrrhonist lifestyle. Both Pyrrhonists and Buddhists, Kuzminski claims, are similar with regards to their way of life. In both traditions, views are suspended, leaving the subject free to experience the natural flow of thoughts and sensations. The subject is able to react spontaneously and, presumably, appropriately, to the stimulus offered by appearances free of distortion.

Chapter four is devoted largely to a discussion about the views of a couple of more modern philosophers, George Berkeley and Ludwig Wittgenstein, each of whom Kuzminski takes to be independently rediscovering something like Pyrrhonist attitudes and conclusions. Berkeley broke with the (dogmatic) mainstream philosophical tradition and its distinction between appearance and reality by denying that some kind of independently existing external reality has to underlie our appearances. According to him, appearances just are reality. He mirrors the Pyrrhonists, Kuzminski argues, in so far as they each affirm that immediately evident thoughts and sensations are entirely real, and that their reality consists in their being perceived by some consciousness. Unlike the Pyrrhonists however, Berkeley fell into dogmatism when he concluded the existence of a divine author and supporter, God, behind all phenomena. The Pyrrhonists would have suspended judgment about any such notion. The author claims that Wittgenstein, who, though he did not appear to be familiar with their work, also came close to something like a Pyrrhonist attitude towards experience. Like the Pyrrhonists, he does not doubt appearances (or objects, as he calls them), but takes them as his criteria. Moreover, for the Pyrrhonists, non-evident claims about the world can neither be denied or affirmed; instead any judgment about them is to be

suspended. Such claims (i.e., non-evident ones), they say, result from the misuse of language to try to represent what cannot be represented. Kuzminski takes the Pyrrhonists to be anticipating Wittgenstein in this regard, since one of the consistent themes in his earlier work is that unclarity comes from the spurious effort to say or depict what cannot be said or depicted.

Kuzminski concludes his work with some brief conjectures on the future of Pyrrhonism and the possibilities in our time for living a similar non-dogmatic life (akin to the middle path of Buddhism). He claims that ours is a culture of belief, one in which the existence and even the necessity of belief is taken for granted. Beliefs are touted as paths to fulfillment and identity. However, given the ungrounded nature of belief, based on one or another non-evident claim, the result is usually a conflict of beliefs, where violence often becomes the ultimate adjudicator. According to Kuzminski, nonviolence and peace can come about only in the absence of belief, when we adopt something like the Pyrrhonist or Buddhist attitude towards experience.

I have a few concerns with respect to Kuzminski's argument that the origins of Pyrrhonism lay in India, and that certain fundamental aspects of it are without precedent in Greek thought. In chapter two, the author claims, without further argument or investigation, that "we have no reason to question" Diogenes Laertius's testimony (the sole source of evidence on this) that Pyrrho was led to adopt his philosophy because of his contacts in India. This seems to me to be overstating things somewhat. No doubt Diogenes is a useful source when it comes to bringing to light a general and coherent portrayal of an individual or character, but it would be a mistake to assume that all his material is fully reliable or that he was always a very careful historian. It would have perhaps been beneficial for Kuzminski to have spent a little more time on this, especially since, aside from congruence, which may or may not be coincident-

tal, his entire thesis—that Pyrrho imported his philosophy from India—appears to rest on this historical report.

The author also claims, in chapter two, that there is no evidence that Democritus, or any other Greek philosopher before or contemporaneous with Pyrrho used the term *ataraxia* in anything like the Pyrrhonist sense, while a complex vocabulary for such a state definitely existed early on amongst the Indian schools. He attributes to Democritus the use of the term *euthymia*, but he takes this to mean mere cheerfulness or personal satisfaction, a state supervening on what he (Democritus) takes to be the correct dogmatic view of things. But, in fact, Diogenes Laertius attributes to Democritus a more precise specification of *euthymia*, one that is much more in congruence with *ataraxia* as Kuzminski describes it. He says that (according to Democritus) “*euthymia*... is not the same as pleasure, as some have mistakenly reported, but is that state in which the soul remains in calm and stability, not shaken by any fear or superstition, or any other emotion” (IX, 45). The term *athambia* also occurs in the fragments on Democritus, a complementary notion suggesting a kind of freedom from alarm or wonder. Moreover, we have some evidence that another contemporary of Pyrrho, Aristippus of Cyrene, also used the term *euthymia*, as well as other similarly related characterizations of pleasure (see Aelian *VH* 14. 6). In any case, it is not clear to me that Pyrrho must have been influenced by certain Indian schools in developing his notion of *ataraxia*. To some degree, the conceptual resources needed for such a construction were already available to him within his own historical and philosophical context.

There is one final significant Greek precedent Kuzminski fails to make mention of, namely, the views of Aristippus and the later Cyrenaic school (contemporaneous with Pyrrho). The Cyrenaics held that we have no knowledge of anything but our sensations, affections and feelings (*pathe*); with regards to extrinsic or absolute objects, things in them-

selves, or the causes of our feelings, we can know nothing at all. They did not raise doubts about the existence of the external world, but simply thought that knowledge of it was unobtainable. Moreover, since we have infallible awareness of our affections only, they recommended that we reorganize our everyday experience on the basis of our *pathe*. In effect, we live in an internal world, and we are to manage the best we can (see Sextus, *AM* vii 190-91, 199-200). While there are clear differences between the Pyrrhonists and the Cyrenaics (for instance, the latter did not suspend judgment about the external world or non-evident matters, but simply denied that knowledge of them was possible; they also, it seems, took momentary pleasure as their aim, *telos*, in life), there are some striking similarities. Of special importance is that both Pyrrhonists and Cyrenaics did not distrust, but accepted and embraced, our immediately evident sensations and thoughts. And both took appearances as their criteria for action, reacting spontaneously and appropriately to the stimulus offered by them. Kuzminski attributes Pyrrho's embrace of the phenomenal world—this notion of living in the involuntary world of appearances, free to experience their natural flow, using them as guides to action—to Indian or Buddhist influences; but again, it seems to me that there was some precedent for this sort of view native to his own philosophical climate.

Aside from concerns about Greek precedent, Kuzminski does a commendable job of pointing out the marked similarities or congruencies between Indian Buddhism and Pyrrhonism. Moreover, what I found particularly interesting and fruitful—something not often discussed in much detail in the Pyrrhonist literature—were those sections devoted to an examination of the sort of practical life adherence to Pyrrhonist (and Buddhist) attitudes yield. This, in particular, is sure to spark or encourage further inquiry.