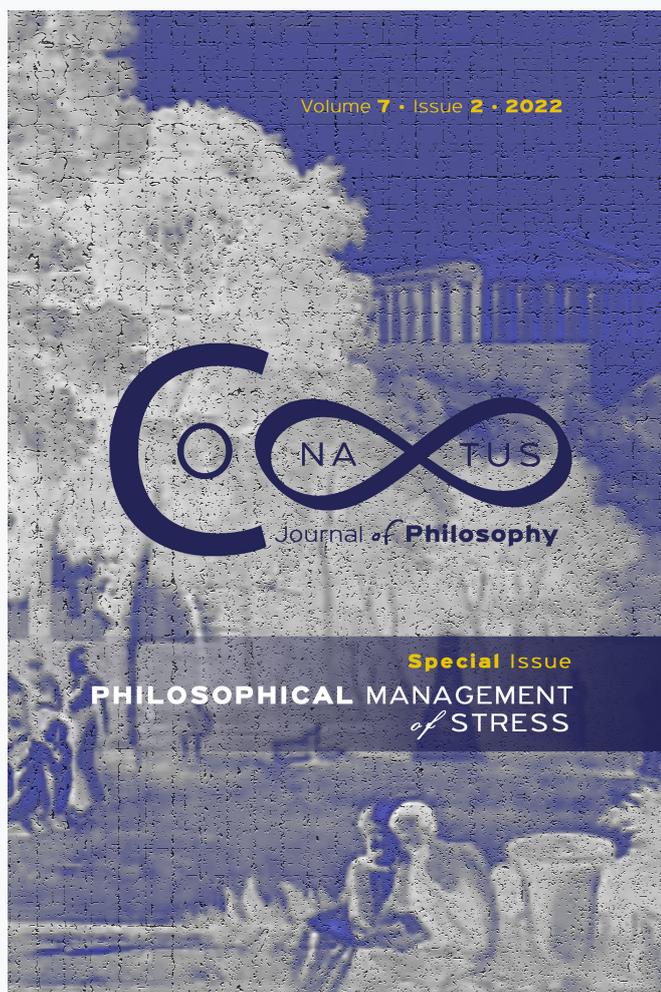


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The Two 'Greek Buddhas'

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The Two 'Greek Buddhas'

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Abstract

This article discusses the influence of Indian Buddhism on Greek Skepticism and their philosophical method of stress management through the Greek philosopher Pyrrho of Elis. That influence was the subject of two books with similar titles mentioning the “Greek Buddha,” as Pyrrho was called by Nietzsche. Both books, one written in Greek from a layman’s perspective approximately 40 years ago and one written in English from a scholarly perspective approximately 6 years ago, discussed the similarities of the Eastern and Western traditions in terms of the goal of serenity, ataraxia. The book published in 1984 was the first one in Greece to link Greek Hellenistic Philosophy to Oriental Wisdom and especially to the early Philosophy of Buddhism. Both traditions offer a practical way of philosophical management of everyday stress and suffering through the mentality of suspension of judgement and non-attachment to certainties.

Keywords: *Pyrrho; skepticism; Greece; Buddhism; India; ataraxia*

The man who changed radically the face of Ancient Greek Philosophy after Aristotle, converted the search for knowledge, truth, and beauty to a discipline allowing humans to weather “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” and introduced the terms *αταραξία* (ataraxia – tranquility) and *ἀλυνία* (alypia – lack of sorrow) in the philosophical vocabulary, was a Greek philosopher who became a disciple of Buddha, during his visit to India as a member of the party of Alexander the Great.¹

¹ Diogenes Laertius, “Pyrrho,” in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IX, vol. 2., trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

This was thoroughly stated and demonstrated in a book published in 1984 in Athens, Greece,² discussed in some other publications, and elaborated in a book published in the USA by Princeton Press in 2015.³ Both books had the same title (*The Greek Buddha*) and the same subject (Pyrrho of Elis).

I am a Greek writer, born in 1935 in Athens, Greece. After I graduated from Athens College, I studied philosophy at the University of Munich, Germany from 1954 to 1960. I specialized in Hellenistic philosophy. My doctoral thesis on the logical and anthropological aspects of skepticism, was finished in May 1960; however, owing to the sudden death of my supervising professor Dr. Joseph Stürmann, it was published later in Greece under the title *Backgammon vs. the Absolute* (backgammon refers to a sentence by David Hume – the leading skeptic philosopher of modern times).

Furthermore, I have written and published 52 books (essays, poetry, stories, and dialogues), some of which have been translated in 10 foreign languages.

I was very much interested in oriental philosophy and art. In 1960 I saw for the first time the earliest specimens of Greek-Buddhist art in the Berlin Museum of Eastern Art. It is interesting that although Buddha had forbidden any depiction of him, his disciples insisted on creating statues and reliefs. This became possible approximately 500 years after his death, when Greek (or Hellenistic) sculptors reached India, creating a new style known as Greco-Buddhist Art. This style is also known as the Gandhara style, after the Indian province in which it originated. In those first specimens the Buddha is depicted with the traits of the Greek god Apollo. The basic difference is the hairdo, a pyramid-like prominence on the top of the head.⁴

I contemplated writing a book about Greco-Buddhist art, when I became interested in another problem of greater importance; that of the transformation of the Greek philosophical thought after Aristotle. The philosophers of the classic period were in search of knowledge and truth. The post Aristotelian schools (Skeptics, Epicureans, Stoics – in chronological order) did not care mostly about truth or knowledge. They tried to alleviate suffering and pain as well as to comfort humans and bring them to a state of “ataraxia” (tranquility). The Romans of the same period called philosophy “*medicina mentis*” (medicine of the soul).

But wait a moment: this is a purely oriental concept! How did it creep into Greek thought? Indian and Chinese philosophy have no interest in

² Nikos Dimou, *The Greek Buddha* (Athens: Nefeli Publications, 1984).

³ Christopher I. Beckwith, *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Press, 2015).

⁴ Benjamin Rowland Jr., “Bodhisattvas or Deified Kings: A Note on Gandhara Sculpture,” *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America* 15 (1961): 6-12.

metaphysics. How did this radical change happen? The explanations furnished by scholars (“decline of Greek thought and society”) were not convincing.

Then I remembered that Pyrrho of Elis (Πύρρων) had travelled to the East, following Alexander the Great and his court of learned men, and had met with the leading thinkers of India. Coming back to Greece, Pyrrho became the originator of the post Aristotelian thought.⁵ The school of the Sceptics, which he founded, was the first. Epicureans and Stoics followed.

It is more than probable that Pyrrho met with the disciples of Buddha. The “enlightened” lived approximately 200 years before Alexander’s visit so his memory and his teaching were still alive.

I. The influence of early Buddhism on Pyrrho

It is clear to all students of early Buddhism, that this cult was not a religion.⁶ It became a religion many centuries later, when believers started building temples, erecting statues of the Master, praying to him, and making offerings. As a matter of fact, in Buddha’s teaching there is no mention of God or Gods. He offers a method to overcome the pain of living. In the sutra “about the raft,” he makes clear what importance he gives to his method.

A man makes a long journey until he comes to a deep river. There is no bridge over the water and no ferry to cross. He sees that the only way was to build a raft. He works hard over many days because the river is wide and deep and the raft must be strong. After two weeks he finishes building the raft and an oar to steer it by. He manages to cross the river and then ponders what he should do with the raft. It cost him a lot of work and he cannot just leave it there. So, he hoists it on his back and continues his journey.

Then the Buddha asks his disciples: “Is that the right decision?” Some answer “yes” and others “no.” “It is not the right decision” says the Master.

This raft was useful for crossing the river – now it is just a heavy burden. So is my teaching. It helps you understand a few things about yourselves – and then it is useless. After having understood it, forget it.

⁵ Adrian Kuzminski, *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008).

⁶ David Drewes, “Early Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism I: Recent Scholarship,” *Religion Compass* 4, no. 2 (2010): 55-65.

There is a basic similarity between Buddhism and the Greek Hellenistic thought. All three Hellenistic schools reject metaphysical and religious subjects. Either totally (remember how Lucretius rejects any religion whatsoever and glorifies Epicurus⁷) or partly by stopping any discussion on such matter as it does not lead to any result.

The main argument of the Skeptics is ἰσοσθένεια (the equal truth value of contrary statements), which leads to the suspension of judgement. This equality is the path to ἀταραξία (ataraxia), i.e., quietude. One should not worry about things that cannot be proven.

Buddha also did not care about Gods or absolute truths. Therefore, there are no holy scripts in early Buddhism. According to another parable:

In battle a warrior is struck by an arrow. There is no meaning in trying to find what the arrow is made of, who shot it, etc. The main thing is to extract the arrow and heal the wound. So, in life it is not of any use to ask if a God has sent us an ill and which God – the important is to take care of the wound.

Additionally, the Buddha was a man of a few words and even fewer theories. His method was practical: to alleviate pain and suffering. His teaching consisted of a few sentences: “We suffer because we attach ourselves to people or objects. When we lose them, we feel pain.” Thus, he preached non-attachment, independence, and distance. In more advanced forms of Buddhist thought, a process of “eliminating” the Self through intensive meditation was attempted. As all our pains start with our self, it seemed a logical proposition.

If Buddha was no orator, Pyrrho was a man of even fewer words. He is the only Greek philosopher who did not leave a written statement behind. Even no quotations from him have survived. However, many anecdotes demonstrate that he was distant and aloof.

It was Pyrrho’s method to fight stress, angst, and fear. He was the one who coined the word “ataraxia,” which became the leading value in all Hellenistic Philosophy. His behavior reminded me of a sentence in the *Nachlass* of Friedrich Nietzsche: “Pyrrho, the Greek Buddha” in volume 13 of the *Sämtliche Werke*.⁸

⁷ Christos Yapijakis, “Ancestral Concepts of Human Genetics and Molecular Medicine in Epicurean Philosophy,” in *History of Human Genetics: Aspects of its Development and Global Perspectives*, eds. Heike I. Petermann, Peter S. Harper, and Susanne Doetz, 41-57 (Cham: Springer, 2017).

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche. *Sämtliche Werke Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 13, eds. Giorgio Colli, andazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980). In pages 264, 265, and 347 Nietzsche writes: “Pyrrho: A Greek Buddhist,” “The Summit: Pyrrho reached the level of Buddhism,” and “Pyrrho. A Buddhist, although Greek, a real Buddha,” respectively.

Nietzsche in his late years provided the title of my book. This was in the early 1980s. As I had already done a lot of work on Hellenic-Buddhist art (I had photographed hundreds of statues in museums, especially the Guimet in Paris) I decided to combine these two aspects of Greek-Eastern relations. Therefore my book consisted of two parts; I consecrated 70 pages to art (plus 10 with plates) and another 70 to philosophy.

It was strange but, in the bibliography I consulted, almost nobody had given any attention to this ideological relationship. The shift in Greek thought was attributed to many factors, but not any influences from the East, not to Pyrrho, his voyage, and his contacts. The only mention I found was by David Sedley in his contribution “The Motivation of Greek Skepticism” in the volume *The Skeptical Tradition* edited by Myles Burnyeat (1983) where he remarked about the “exotic provenance” of skepticism, which was “revolutionary” for Greek thought.⁹ Otherwise, the German historian Zeller writes about moral decay and the shift in the role of philosophy whose main use is to “protect the individual from the vicissitudes of life.” Bertrand Russell in his *A History of Western Philosophy* writes that “fear took the place of hope; the purpose of life was rather to escape misfortune than to achieve any positive good.” Additionally, C. F. Angus in *Cambridge Ancient History* writes that

Philosophy is no longer the pillar of fire going before a few intrepid seekers after truth: it is rather an ambulance following in the wake of the struggle for existence and picking up the weak and wounded.

All these historians, blinded by the glory of Classic Greek Philosophy, of Plato, and Aristotle, miss the fact that philosophy in the Hellenistic world acquired a new depth and a new humanity. It came much closer to the common man; it took more trouble in analyzing and studying everyday life and it became a help and a brace in the daily strife. The Sceptics, the Stoics, and especially the Epicureans, contributed more to the happiness of the human race than all other philosophical schools combined; so did the Buddhists in the Orient.

II. Stress management in Skepticism and Buddhism

Skepticism has nothing to do with “universal doubt.” It refers only to statements that claim to be “absolutely true,” the ones ancient skeptics called dogmatic. Applying doubt to such statements is a very healthy attitude. All big crimes in human history have been perpetrated by fanatic believers in absolute truths.

⁹ David Sedley, “The Motivation of Greek Skepticism,” in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 9-29.

It is interesting to compare the epoché (ἐποχή), meaning the suspension of judgement, the act of abstaining from affirmation or negation on any matter with the Buddhist philosophers who followed Buddha like Nagasena, author of the *Madhyamaka*, or Chandrakirti who introduced the notion of emptiness (sunyata), an analog of the Greek “epoché.”¹⁰

Pyrrho did not leave a single sentence behind. However, his followers wrote a lot. This is especially true for Sextus Empiricus, who bequeathed us four volumes of skeptical thought. As an experiment, I translated some excerpts from early Buddhist Sutras and printed them alongside texts from Sextus. They matched perfectly.

In the meantime, many scholars from all over the world worked on the subject I had just touched in my book. The association of Greek Philosophy with Indian thought was seen from many aspects. One element that the Greeks had probably not noticed and not copied was the element of meditation – a practice unknown in the West, but very important as the culmination of deep thinking in the East.

Even technology has been used to measure the effects of tranquility.¹¹ A younger scholar concludes his lengthy essay with a skeptic statement:

Taken together, the studies are a modest attempt to start an empirical investigation of Pyrrhonian Skepticism. Much remains to be done. That said, the present results counsel us to treat Sextus' claims with skepticism.¹²

III. Thirty-one years later

My book was published in 1984 and to my surprise was a success; six printings were a rare feat for a book consecrated to philosophy and art. It is still available in bookstores.

Imagine my surprise when 31 years later, I was informed that a book with the same title and subject appeared in the United States.

Of course, there could be no comparison. I ordered the book from Amazon. The American book extends to 295 pages. The author, Professor Christopher I. Beckwith, is a distinguished scholar (Indiana University) with

¹⁰ Adrian Kuzminski, “Pyrrhonism and the *Madhyamaka*,” *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 4 (2007): 482-511.

¹¹ Shukan Okanoa, and Kozen Takeuchi, “Effects of Japanese Esoteric Buddhist Meditation on Stress Management in Humans,” in *Proceedings of 4th IIAE International Conference on Industrial Application Engineering* (2016), 382-385.

¹² Mario Attie-Picker, “Does Skepticism lead to Tranquility? Exploring a Pyrrhonian Theme,” in *Oxford Studies in Experimental Philosophy*, vol. 3, eds. Tania Lombrozo, Joshua Knobe, and Shaun Nichols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 97-125.

degrees in Tibetan and Chinese and many pages of mentions in scholarly indexes and reviews. The book has been published by Princeton Press.

Although the two books have the same title and the same subject (the full title of the American book runs: *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia*) they differ in content and method. I must admit that I learned a lot of new things from Professor Beckwith.

He inserted a short note mentioning the existence of my book (a Greek colleague informed him about it). I would ask him, in a future reprint to correct a basic mistake. My book does not “concern the influences of Hellenism on Buddhism,” but exactly the opposite. Actually, his book is the in depth elaboration of my basic idea. I am thankful for this elaboration – it converted a fleeting inspiration in a solid treatise.

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