# EARLY PYRRHONISM AS A SECT OF BUDDHISM?
# A CASE STUDY IN THE METHODOLOGY
# OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

## MONTE RANSOME JOHNSON & BRETT SHULTS

**ABSTRACT:** *We offer a sceptical examination of a thesis recently advanced in a monograph published by Princeton University Press entitled* Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia. *In this dense and probing work, Christopher I. Beckwith, a professor of Central Eurasian studies at Indiana University, Bloomington, argues that Pyrrho of Elis adopted a form of early Buddhism during his years in Bactria and Gandhāra, and that early Pyrrhonism must be understood as a sect of early Buddhism. In making his case Beckwith claims that virtually all scholars of Greek, Indian, and Chinese philosophy have been operating under flawed assumptions and with flawed methodologies, and so have failed to notice obvious and undeniable correspondences between the philosophical views of the Buddha and of Pyrrho. In this study we take Beckwith's proposal and challenge seriously, and we examine his textual basis and techniques of translation, his methods of examining passages, his construal of problems and his reconstruction of arguments. We find that his presuppositions are contentious and doubtful, his own methods are extremely flawed, and that he draws unreasonable conclusions. Although the result of our study is almost entirely negative, we think it illustrates some important general points about the methodology of comparative philosophy.*

**Keywords:** *adiaphora, anātman, anattā, ataraxia, Buddha, Buddhism, Democritus, Pāli, Pyrrho, Pyrrhonism, Scepticism, trilakṣaṇa*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most ambitious recent works devoted to comparative philosophy is Christopher Beckwith's monograph *Greek Buddha: Pyrrho's Encounter with Early Buddhism in Central Asia* (2015). Beckwith's thesis is not that Greeks influenced

JOHNSON, MONTE RANSOME: Associate Professor, Philosophy Department, University of California, San Diego, USA. Email: monte@ucsd.edu

SHULTS, BRETT: Independent Researcher. Email: brett.shults@gmail.com

Buddhism, but that Buddhists influenced Hellenistic Age Greeks, especially the philosopher Pyrrho of Elis (ca. 365-275 BCE). In Beckwith's own words:

> The conclusion to be drawn from the evidence about Pyrrho's thought and practice is that he adopted a form of Early Buddhism during his years in Bactria and Gandhāra, including its philosophical-religious and pragmatic elements, but he stripped it of its alien garb and reconstituted it as a new 'Greek Buddhism' for the Hellenistic world, which he presented in his own words to Timon and his other students. (54-55)

This conclusion is supported by an exhibition of evidence staggering in variety and complexity, including Greek, Indic, and Chinese material from the ancient through early modern periods of philosophy. The scope and ambition of Beckwith's project is breathtaking, compelling the reader to consider a vast range of fascinating ideas. Beckwith is in general to be congratulated and encouraged for having the intellectual bravery to undertake such a difficult and noble enterprise of comparative philosophy, one that touches on so many central issues in various fields of research. In Beckwith's view, myriad misconceptions about the relative chronologies and lines of influence between the Greek, Indic, and Chinese traditions have resulted in "misinformation" that has "inflicted damage" not only in the field of Indology, but also in the study of Greek and Chinese philosophy (ix). Furthermore, such misconceptions have served to "maintain the traditional fiction of three totally unrelated peoples and traditions as 'cultural islands' that had absolutely no contact of any kind with each other until much later times" (ix). This is a view that Beckwith associates with the work of Karl Jaspers (ix). According to Beckwith: "It seems that Jaspers's theory of an Axial Age of philosophy cannot be a fantasy after all, but it was not the result of some sort of mystical *ch'i* that spread mysteriously over Eurasia, it was the result of concrete contacts, on the ground, by known peoples" (124). Beckwith assumes Jaspers' burden not only of comparing the ideas of ancient Greece, India, and China, but also of establishing direct historical lines of influence between them all. In so doing he promises to synthesize some of the greatest philosophical movements of all time: Greek Pyrrhonism, Indian Buddhism, and Chinese Taoism.

But Beckwith's argument is about far more than ancient philosophy. It is very much about modern scholarship and what Beckwith sees as its innumerable failures. Classicists have failed, Indologists have failed, and philosophers and historians of various stripes have failed, but the failures have been greatest, apparently, in the field of Buddhist studies. For "almost everyone in Buddhist studies" has made an error that is "methodological and theoretical in nature" (viii). The error, according to Beckwith, involves some combination of refusal to work with "hard data," reliance on "traditional accounts," the misuse or ignoring of evidence and, at the same time, the clinging to "stubborn unexamined beliefs" (viii-ix). Beckwith promises something different: "My approach in the book is to base all of my main arguments on hard data—inscriptions, datable manuscripts, other dated texts, and archaeological reports. I do not allow traditional belief to determine anything in the book" (xii-xiii). One soon comes to realize that for Beckwith "tradition" and "traditional" are problematic

categories that encompass not only the thinking of ancient Buddhists, but a strand of modern scholarship to which Beckwith is utterly opposed. Unlike those who wish to "safely continue their traditional beliefs without the necessity of thinking about them," Beckwith sets out to "examine the evidence as carefully and precisely as possible, and to draw reasonable conclusions based on it" (xiv).

Many of the positions that Beckwith takes cannot be dealt with here, not only for want of space but for want of expertise in all the research languages and the documentary and archeological evidence on which Beckwith draws, or seems to draw, as he goes about his task of comparative philosophy. To engage all of Beckwith's arguments and sub-arguments would entail working through citations of mountains and fields of specialized research that he ranges over in languages from Aramaic to Tokharian. Most of this, however, is peripheral to his main argument, and for purposes of this study we have elected to evaluate whether Beckwith demonstrates the overall conclusion quoted above. We argue that he does not, and that the reasons for his failure offer an instructive case study in the methodology of comparative philosophy. Our evaluation involves the consideration of several and sundry texts from the ancient world. We begin, however, with Beckwith's introduction to the Buddha and his radical conception of the relative value of the Greek and Indic evidence.

## 2. THE BUDDHA AND THE EVIDENCE

According to Beckwith the Buddha's epithet was *Śakamuni*, which meant "Sage of the Scythians" (5). He contends that the epithet was later Sanskritized as *Śākyamuni*, that it is "unattested" in the Pāli canon, and that it is attested earliest as *Śakamuni* in Gāndhārī Prakrit texts dating to the first centuries CE or possibly earlier (5-6). For Beckwith "the Buddha is the only Indian holy man before early modern times" whose epithet identifies him explicitly as a "foreigner" (6). The Buddha, according to Beckwith, was not really an Indian but a Scythian.

This introduction to the Buddha signals Beckwith's unusual take on Buddhist history, but it does not inspire confidence in his handling and presentation of the evidence. For one thing, Beckwith provides no primary source for the epithet *Śakamuni*, yet he insists that this particular term signaled the Buddha's foreign and Scythian identity, which "people actually understood and accepted…by calling him *Śakamuni*" (7). It is only after frequently and ostentatiously preferring the latter to attested forms (such as *Śākyamuni*, *Śakamuni*, and *Sakyamuni*) that Beckwith reveals that this "traditional" epithet is really quite problematic: "The traditional epithet of the Buddha, *Śakamuni*…cannot therefore be easily dismissed, despite its absence from the very scanty early written sources" (165). To repeat, Beckwith never cites any primary source that attests to *Śakamuni*, and this point is revealing in that it shows, as do other examples, how Beckwith is often unclear about his sources and

what exactly can be found in them.[1] And then there is what else Beckwith does not say. He dismisses "tradition" on the Buddha's clan (6 n16), but he does not mention that tradition has understood the Buddha's epithet to mean not "Sage of the Scythians" but "Sage of the Śākya Clan" (to use the Sanskrit form of the clan or tribal designation; compare Pāli *sakka, sakya, sākiya*). Nor does he mention the fact that Michael Witzel (1989, 239; 1997, 307-313; 2005, 86) and other scholars, including Asko Parpola (2002, 370) and Jayarava Atwood (2012), have suggested that the Buddha might have come from a tribe whose ancestors were Iranians or Scythians. Beckwith thinks that the Buddha's "personal name" was either Gautama or Gotama (Beckwith 2015, 161), but he does not mention that Gautama is a name widely attested in Indian texts, that it is a patronymic in the Indian style from the name Gotama, that the name Gotama appears in numerous Indian texts including the *Ṛgveda Saṃhitā*, and that Gotama is the name of the Buddha in numerous texts of Indian Buddhism preserved in the Pāli language. That is, Beckwith does not say why a "non-Indian" (6) like the Buddha would have a name that is thoroughly Indian. Another problematic omission is that Beckwith ignores the form *sakyamuni* as it, in fact, occurs in the Pāli canon.[2]

But Beckwith's point that the dates of the Buddha are not recorded in a reliable historical source (5) is well taken, for, although the point is widely known, many scholars act as if the point does not really matter. Beckwith, to his credit, thinks that it does matter. His attempt to solve the problem, however, is unusual. Developments in the Persian empire guarantee that the Buddha must have lived after approximately 518 BCE, according to Beckwith (7, 11, 169, 172). Yet the Buddha must have lived before 330-325 BCE, when Pyrrho of Elis was in Bactria, Gandhāra, and Sindh (10, 169), and certainly before the ambassador Megasthenes travelled to Arachosia, Gandhāra and Magadha in 305-304 BCE on a voyage recollected in his *Indica* (since, according to Beckwith, there are undeniable references to Buddhist practitioners therein). That is, "the Buddha must have passed away well before 325 to 304 BC, the

---

[1] Beckwith confusingly claims that *Śākamuni* "is attested only from the Saka-Kushan period on, the earliest examples to date having been found in the Gāndhārī documents" (70 and n32). But *A Dictionary of Gāndhārī* (Baums and Glass, in progress), to which Beckwith appeals for the attestation of *Śakamuni* (Beckwith 2015, 5-6 and 6 n15), does not attest to *Śakamuni*. It is unclear whence Beckwith has come up with *Śākamuni*.

[2] For one of several examples see Rhys Davids and Carpenter 1982, 274 (= D ii 274), in the Pāli expression *sakyamunīti* (i.e., *sakyamuni* with normal vowel lengthening before the particle *ti*). This expression is identical to one that appears in the Lumbini inscription that Beckwith finds so problematic. As such, the Pāli expression should have informed his discussion of the inscription, which, apart from this omission, has other problems. We are told that the Lumbini inscription "explicitly calls him *Śākyamuni*," and that this "use of the Sanskrit form of his epithet, *Śākyamuni* . . . is astounding" (Beckwith 2015, 245). But it is not astounding, because *Śākyamuni* does not appear in the inscription. As Beckwith states in a footnote: "The Lumbini Inscription, line 3, has *Budhe jate Sakyamuni ti*" (245 n64). This is not right either. The correct line is line 2, where the final portion of the text reads *sakyamunīti* (transliterated as "Sakyamunī ti" by Hultzsch 1925, 164). In sum: relevant material from the Pāli canon is ignored, the primary text is relegated to the footnotes and silently improved (slightly, by resolving sandhi), and what Beckwith says about it is not accurate.

dates for the appearance of the earliest hard evidence on the existence of Buddhism or elements of Buddhism" (13).

This "hard evidence" is supposed to be found in fragments of Megasthenes and in evidence for Pyrrho preserved in a fragment of Aristocles providing testimony about Pyrrho's pupil Timon. Beckwith emphasizes that the period 325-304 BCE "is still *three centuries* before" the earliest Gāndhārī texts and the traditional date ascribed to the writing down of the Pāli canon.[3] Thus he takes the Greek evidence for early Buddhism to be of much greater antiquity than any Indic texts that could be used to shed light on the subject. In fact, his inclination is to ignore Indic texts as much as possible: "hard" ones can be used, but most are useless because they are "late," "traditional," "fantasy-filled," and so on (18, et passim). It does not much bother Beckwith that the fragments of Megasthenes' *Indica* and the *testimonium* of Aristocles are only preserved in later Greek sources by authors such as Strabo (born ca. 64 BCE), Clement (born ca. 150 CE), and Eusebius (ca. 260-339 CE).[4] Nor is it a problem that Strabo's version of the *Indica* was "interpolated and expanded by others," that Strabo's method of selection was compromised by the period's preference for "light, chatty, titillating stories," and that the process of transmission through medieval scribes was imperfect (67-68). What matters is that "it preserves part of the earliest *dated* eyewitness account of Indian philosophical-religious practices and ideas by far. It is therefore incalculably more important than any of the other texts traditionally considered to represent or reflect Early Buddhism" (68).

Similarly, Greek texts are supposed to be the best source of information on "Early Brahmanism" (67). For Beckwith thinks that important Brahmanical texts such as the Upaniṣads are not very ancient, and that they could not have influenced the Buddha. This is a departure from the "traditional view," according to which the Buddha was responding not only to other sects but to Brahmanical religious ideas.[5] Beckwith depends on the Indologist Johannes Bronkhorst for support: "The traditional view is that the Buddha reinterpreted existing Indian ideas found in the Upanishads, but the Upanishads in question cannot be dated to a period earlier than the Buddha, as shown by Bronkhorst" (8). Beckwith pays no attention to criticism of Bronkhorst's position and relevant work.[6] And Beckwith's engagement with related scholarship sometimes comes across as shallow and tendentious.[7]

---

[3] Beckwith 2015, 13. Note that in the present study all italics in quotations are in the source quoted.

[4] Dates of these and other ancient figures are from the online *Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World* or other reference works available at http://www.oxfordreference.com.

[5] A good representative of this kind of interpretation is found in Gombrich 2006, 2007, 2013.

[6] E.g., Collins 1987; Witzel 1987, 407 n96; 2009; Werner 1988; Roebuck 2000, xiii-xv; Lindquist 2005, 13-20; Wynne 2010, 207-209; Hiltebeitel 2011, 93ff. See also Bausch 2015, 176.

[7] E.g., Beckwith claims that Patrick Olivelle "rightly doubts Bronkhorst's theory of the 'Magadhan' origin of belief in rebirth and karma" (Beckwith 2015, 131 n79). But this is a misleading claim, as can be seen from what Olivelle actually says in the work to which Beckwith refers (see Olivelle 2012, 176ff.). After discussing Aśoka and some of Bronkhorst's ideas, Olivelle writes in an endnote: "Thus, in an interesting way, the very absence of rebirth and karmic retribution in the Magadhan texts of Aśoka may indeed support Bronkhorst's thesis that they arose in the region of greater Magadha" (183 n27).

Beckwith thus brings to the table a distinctive set of ideas about the evidence for understanding the history of Buddhism and Indian philosophy. And in making his case he has much to say on topics ranging from the "Mauryan king Devānāṃpriya Priyadarśi" (64, 84, 125) to the "Pre-Pure Land sect" (64, 80, 84, 107, 132, 135). These and yet other topics (including Zoroaster, monsoons, Einstein's theory of relativity, Taoism, David Hume, the meaning of *śramaṇa*) are brought into his larger argument.[8] However, in what follows we will focus primarily on what Beckwith calls "Early Pyrrhonism" (passim). Despite the interest these other topics hold, this focus is justified by Beckwith's description of his project in these terms: "I have attempted to solve several major problems in the history of thought. The most important of these problems involves the source of Pyrrho's teachings" (x).

Beckwith represents the Greek testimonies for Pyrrho as the best and earliest evidence for a form of early Buddhism whose signature doctrine was "things have no inherent self-identity (no differentiations), they are unstable, and they are unfixed" (63). Beckwith identifies this three-part doctrine with the Sanskrit and Buddhist doctrinal term *trilakṣaṇa* (which could be translated fairly literally as "three-marks"). And this is what Pyrrho is supposed to have learned on his travels. Pyrrho, travelling with his teacher Anaxarchus (killed ca. 320 BCE), "learned a form of Early Buddhism in 330-325 BC, when he was in Bactria and Gandhāra with the court of Alexander the Great" (68). Upon returning to Greece he taught pupils like Timon of Phlius (ca. 320-230 BCE), thus propagating the earliest known form of Buddhism: "The earliest attested philosophical-religious system that is both historically datable and clearly recognizable as a form of Buddhism is Early Pyrrhonism, the teachings and practices of Pyrrho of Elis and Timon of Phlius" (61). Much of Beckwith's argument is occupied with demonstrating the thesis that Pyrrho's teachings are "virtually a translation" (32) of the Buddha's, but to him the point hardly needs demonstration: "Pyrrho's teachings…are manifestly based on Early Buddhism" (154).

For Beckwith "Early Buddhism" is something distinct and, very importantly, something that can be reconstructed on the basis of hard evidence. This form of Buddhism can also be called "Pre-Normative Buddhism," as opposed to "Normative Buddhism."[9] Beckwith introduces and uses the term "Normative Buddhism" to refer to a later form of Buddhism which he associates with various monastic and scholastic traditions that introduced inaccuracies into the Buddha's teachings. In fact, this opposition between "Normative Buddhism" and "Pre-Normative Buddhism" reigns supreme as the organizing principle for the evidence on which Beckwith builds his thesis. This can be seen in the way these concepts control the interpretation of

---

[8] For some criticism of Beckwith's treatment of the term *śramaṇa* see Shults 2016.

[9] See Beckwith 2015, 8-13, et passim. "Normative Buddhism" is an unfortunate term since both the earliest and the latest forms of Buddhism are all "normative" in the philosophical sense. Beckwith never explains adequately why he uses the term "normative" as he does, when "late" or "later" would make his point more straightforwardly, as when he uses terms such as "Late Zoroastrianism" (8 n28), "Late Brahmanism" (9, 66, 251), and "Late Pyrrhonism" (passim) to describe what came after their putative "Early" forms.

evidence, as when Beckwith tells us that the stone inscriptions in early Brahmi script of the Mauryan period were not erected by any historical Aśoka as most scholars think, but are mostly forgeries and worthless for reconstructing what happened: "the king who ordered the creation of the Major Inscriptions could not have been Devānāṃpriya Aśoka…because the contents of the Buddhist Inscriptions *explicitly attributed* to Aśoka belong to Normative Buddhism" (137). Beckwith's overall success or failure rests on his ability to establish "Normative Buddhism" as well as "Early Buddhism" or "Pre-Normative Buddhism," along with "Early Pyrrhonism" and "Late Pyrrhonism," as valid categories for differentiating beliefs and practices. And that effort is bound up with his absolute insistence that the Buddhist *trilakṣaṇa* teaching is clearly visible in the teachings of Pyrrho.[10]

## 3. THE EVIDENCE FOR PYRRHO'S BUDDHISM

Early in *Greek Buddha* Beckwith outlines what he intends to show:

> This book shows not only that Pyrrho's complete package is similar to Early Buddhism, but also that the same significant parts and interconnections occur in the same way in both systems. The earliest sources on Early Pyrrhonism and Early Buddhism are examined closely, including in some cases determining what 'Early' means. They show that the close parallel between Early Pyrrhonism and Early (Pre-Normative) Buddhism is systemic and motivated by the same internal logic. (21)

Beckwith thus assumes the burden of describing not only "Pyrrho's complete package" but also "Early Buddhism." But let us pause to consider the fact that neither Pyrrho nor the Buddha wrote anything, and that all the evidence for their views is preserved in later texts. The reconstruction of Pyrrho's views in particular depends on highly fragmentary materials. Thus, it does not seem to us in principle possible to speak meaningfully of a "complete package" in this context. Perceived parallels between even fragmentary texts may be examined fruitfully, of course, provided that we remain vigilant about the limitations of our sources. In the present case, despite the limitations of our sources the systematicity of the Pyrrhonism they reveal is crucial to Beckwith's argument and is frequently stressed by him:

> Most significantly, no one has been able to relate Pyrrho's thought, *as a system*, to any other European tradition. If Pyrrhonism were simply a pastiche of Greek philosophical tidbits—as most Classicists have in effect argued—why would anyone have paid any attention to it, and how could it possibly have revolutionized Hellenistic philosophy, as it most certainly did? (17)

---

[10] The idea that Buddhism changed over time is fairly uncontroversial. The issue here is the difficulty of stratification (of teachings within the Pāli Nikāyas, for example) and whether Beckwith's attempt at discerning strata is successful.

To do the latter, to argue like "most Classicists," is to partake of the dreaded "smorgasbord" approach of accounting for philosophical influence (15 n52, 17 n62, 153 n34, 223 n18, 224, 255). But this is a false dichotomy, according to which one must either connect Pyrrho's thought *as a system* to another European tradition or imagine it as a pastiche of Greek philosophical "tidbits." To answer Beckwith: there are many reasons why one could have acquired a taste for Pyrrho other than his serving up a philosophical "system." Above all, perhaps, was the impressive character of his personality (as noted by Diogenes Laertius and others). In the ancient world, with its great variety of holy men, sages, and wisdom-lovers, did one really need a "system" to attract attention? We should exhibit at least as much caution in attributing to Pyrrho a "system" as we typically do in the case of Socrates, to whom few would confidently attribute a philosophical "system." Furthermore, it is not at all certain, as Beckwith claims, that Pyrrho himself revolutionized Hellenistic philosophy. Some scholars think that Pyrrho may have been chosen as the symbolic representative of a later philosophy principally developed by Aenesidemus (see below), who was trying to distinguish his radical form of scepticism from the Academic one, which in his view had become practically indistinguishable from Stoicism.[11]

As Beckwith begins to lay out his vision of how ancient thought should be studied and compared, he quotes an objection stated by a reviewer of his manuscript:

> He says, 'A strong case could be made that even relatively specific features of the history of philosophy…could be explained as a generic motif rather than, so to speak, as a patented idea.' He contends that 'two figures saying similar, or even identical, things in different parts of the world is never enough to establish direct influence.' (x-xi)

Beckwith considers this to be a "problematic claim with respect to philosophy and religious studies," but this academic boilerplate soon gives way to a defiant vision of what the reviewer had to say: "The reviewer's assertion denies the possibility of communication by language even in the same language…." (xi). From this and other statements one gains the impression that Beckwith feels the weight of his struggles not only with tradition but with everyone who cannot understand comparison, and his engagements with straw men are indeed tiresome and discouraging.[12] In fact the

---

[11] As the above quotes suggest, Beckwith's objective is to "relate"; to show that "Early Pyrrhonism" is "similar" or "parallel" to "Early Buddhism." Clear principles of comparison are announced elsewhere in statements such as: "it is important to compare Pyrrho's own thought with the thought of the Buddhism *of his own day* as much as possible" (20); "we must begin by comparing whole systems" (224). The methodological principle of comparing ensemble to ensemble is sound, but we question if the ensembles that Beckwith compares really are the complete packages or "systems" of Pyrrho and the Buddha (see below).

[12] Some of Beckwith's statements on comparison are also baffling in light of what he says elsewhere: "It is important to note that this book is *not* a comparison of anything" (ix). This startling statement might be correct if it were true that Pyrrho's teachings are "unique" (xii) and exactly equal to the Buddha's (i.e., that we are dealing with one incomparable set of teachings). Sometimes Beckwith seems to believe this. But his procedures as well as his working vocabulary – "similar" (21), "similarities" (20), "close" (224), "parallel" (193 n47), "close parallel" (21), "so close" (32), "closer" (32 n43), "virtually" (32), "version" (32, 154), "like" (218), "both systems" (21), "based on" (21, 154),

reviewer was raising the important distinction between genealogy and analogy in the comparative enterprise, and Beckwith's insistence on the former and rejection of the latter, though unusually vehement, is nothing new in the tradition of western scholarship.[13] For in many ways Beckwith is quite traditional in his approach to scholarship, and so it is not very surprising that he invokes the Biblical paradigm: "The field of biblical studies is founded on the ability and necessity to do text criticism. It is purely *because* textual near identity is recognizable that textual scholars can identify interpolations…and so on" (xi). One thus understands that Beckwith's project has to do with spotting textual similarities to prove a genealogical relation between certain Buddhist and Greek ideas. But it is one thing to establish a stemma for a collection of Hebrew or Greek manuscripts, let us say, and demonstrate their interpolations, while it is another to demonstrate systematic and internal logical relations or identities, due to historical contact, between two traditions of ancient wisdom. To accomplish this feat Beckwith will basically reduce the vast collection of Buddhist literature down to a few points that he thinks tally with statements in Pyrrho's "system" – themselves reduced from a much larger collection of Pyrrhonist literature – and then erect a sprawling apparatus of arguments to make plausible and shore up the supposed likeness. In the next section we turn to some of this supporting argumentation. Before we do so, however, a few more preliminary comments are in order.

When we are dealing with extremely general philosophical issues, such as whether or not anything has a definite nature, or anything can be known, or anything produces tranquility, there seems to be nothing preventing two individuals even in completely different traditions (in different places, at different times) coming to the same general conclusion or stating the same position (such as: that nothing has a definite nature, or nothing is knowable, or that suspending belief causes tranquility). Or consider the logical form of the tetralemma: (1) it is; (2) it is not; (3) it both is and is not; (4) it neither is nor is not. We do not think the existence of the tetralemma in two different traditions to be a phenomenon that requires an explanation of historical influence. For if a tradition contains a distinction between affirmation and negation, then it is capable of producing the first two propositions of the tetralemma; in order to get the remaining two we need only assume that the tradition is capable of disjunction and conjunction. Beckwith will bring the tetralemma into his web of argument, so the preceding remarks serve also as a reminder of what the tetralemma is. But in the case of establishing a line of influence from an ancient *śramaṇa* to a Hellenistic Greek philosopher we have every reason to expect a much more difficult task than recognizing the form of the tetralemma or spotting what look like similarities in ancient texts. To show some of the difficulties in establishing a connection between philosophical texts from different traditions, let us now consider Beckwith's account of "Scythian Philosophy" (1-21).

---

"reconstituted" (55), "relationship" (224), "translation" (32), "interpretation" (220), "difference" (32), "differences" (220), etc. – reveal his actual suppositions and methodology.

[13] See, for example, the discussion by Jonathan Z. Smith in *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (1994).

## 4. ANACHARSIS AND ZHUANG ZI

As Beckwith reminds us, the Scythians built a vast empire north of the Medes and the Persians and "grew fabulously rich on trade" (1). There were great thinkers among them as well, and Beckwith calls our attention to two of them. These "Scythian philosophers" are "Anacharsis the Scythian" (2) and "Gautama Buddha, the Scythian sage" (5). The first figure is familiar from stories in Herodotus, Diogenes Laertius, Plutarch, and others. The second figure is not at all familiar from Greek sources: the earliest direct reference to the Buddha in any western source is contained in the writings of Clement of Alexandria.[14] That fact and the contrast with Anacharsis should give us pause about assuming a major influence of the Buddha on Greek philosophy. For if the Buddha was a major influence on Greek philosophy, why is this not reflected in any Greek source, when Greeks sources do report on a "Scythian philosopher" of equal or greater obscurity? In the Age of Solon, during the forty-seventh Olympiad (592-589 BCE), Anacharsis travelled to Greece and became famous for his sayings, which later writers quoted and imitated (2-3). No such evidence for the Buddha as an influence on Greek philosophy survives in any Greek source.

Diogenes Laertius (ca. 3rd c. CE) paraphrases an argument attributed to Anacharsis: "He said he wondered why among the Greeks the experts contend, but the non-experts decide" (Diogenes Laertius I.8.103, tr. Hicks; quoted in Beckwith 2015, 2). This expresses an anti-democratic sentiment fairly typical in Greek philosophy, but suppose that it can be attributed to Anacharsis specifically. Sextus Empiricus (ca. 2nd c. CE) relates a lengthier argument according to which some people say that Anacharsis "does away with" the criterion of judgement:

> And Anacharsis the Scythian, they say, does away with the apprehension that is capable of judging every skill, and strenuously criticizes the Greeks for holding on to it. For who, he says, is the person who judges something skillfully? Is it the ordinary person or the skilled person? We would not say it is the ordinary person. For he is defective in his knowledge of the peculiarities of skills. The blind person does not grasp the workings of sight, nor the deaf person those of hearing. And so, too, the unskilled person does not have a sharp eye when it comes to the apprehension of what has been achieved through skill, since if we actually back this person in his judgment on some matter of skill, there will be no difference between skill and lack of skill, which is absurd. So the ordinary person is not a judge of the peculiarities of skills. It remains, then, to say that it is the skilled person – which is again unbelievable. For one judges either a person with the same pursuits as oneself, or a person with different pursuits. But one is not capable of judging someone with different pursuits; for one is familiar with one's own skill, but as far as someone else's skill is concerned one's status is that of an ordinary person. Yet neither can one certify a person with the same pursuits as oneself. For this was the very issue we were examining: who is to be the judge of these people, who are of identical

---

[14] See Clement of Alexandria, *Strom*. I.xv.71.3-6. Beckwith (2015, 100 nn131-135) gives and discusses the extended Greek passage from Stählin's edition of Clement.

ability as regards the same skill. Besides, if one person judges the other, the same thing will become both judging and judged, trustworthy and untrustworthy. For in so far as the other person has the same pursuits as the one being judged, he will be untrustworthy since he too is being judged, while in so far as he is judging he will be trustworthy. But it is not possible for the same thing to be both judging and judged, trustworthy and untrustworthy; therefore there is no one who judges skillfully. For this reason there is not a criterion either. For some criteria are skilled and some are ordinary; but neither do the ordinary ones judge (just as the ordinary person does not), nor do the skilled ones (just as the skilled person does not), for the reasons stated earlier. Therefore nothing is a criterion. (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians* VII.1, 55-59, tr. Bett 2005, 13-14)

Beckwith admits that, since the "focus of the text is the Problem of the Criterion, which is acknowledged not to have existed in Greek philosophy before the time of Pyrrho," it cannot be an authentic work of Anacharsis. "Nevertheless, it is modeled directly" on a "brief, genuine quotation of Anacharsis himself on the same topic—the problem of judging or deciding—and other genuine quotations similar in nature" (4). Notice that Beckwith at once asserts that the longer text cannot be believed because it relates to a problem that was not formulated until much later, yet at the same time asserts that Anacharsis had, after all, spoken "on the same topic." This slippage is intolerable, but just as one notices it Beckwith moves on to a far-fetched comparison of the argument in Sextus Empiricus with the following one in the *Zhuang-Zi*:

If you defeat me, I do not defeat you, are you then right, and I am not? If I defeat you, you do not defeat me, am I then right, you are not? Is one of us right, one of us wrong? Or are both of us right, both of us wrong? If you and I cannot figure it out, then everyone will be mystified by it. Who shall we get to decide who is right? We could get someone who agrees with you to decide who is right, but since he agrees with you, how could he decide it aright? We could get someone who agrees with me to decide who is right, but since he agrees with me, how can he decide it aright? Therefore neither I nor you nor anyone else can figure it out. (Beckwith 2015, 4)

Beckwith points out that the *Zhuang-Zi* (or the *Chuangtzu*) passage employs a tetralemma. He does not point out that the Anacharsis passage in Sextus Empiricus does not involve a tetralemma, or comment on this obvious dissimilarity. Rather, his next move is to suggest an "explanation for the similarity of these two passages" along the following lines. It "could well be" that the author of the Anacharsis passage "had heard just such an argument, directly or indirectly, from a Scythian." Scythians lived in Athens, and so: "If it was a stock Scythian story, an eastern Scythian…could have transmitted a version of it to the Chinese, so that it ended up in the *Chuangtzu*" (5). Passing over the speculation in this proposal, we note that Beckwith does not actually compare the arguments before moving on to the second "Scythian philosopher" to be discussed, namely the Buddha. Instead, he rests content on juxtaposing the texts and asserting their similarity, despite his comment which actually points to the dissimilarity of their logical forms. Since we are now talking about comparing Greek and Chinese philosophical texts, mere juxtaposition is not

enough to establish their similarity, much less their derivation from a common source. When we actually pause to compare the philosophical arguments, whatever similarity they might have seemed to possess begins to disappear. Without that similarity the possibility that they represent anything related to a "stock" Scythian story – and the implication of such for Beckwith's thesis – disappears. Let us then pause to analyze both passages.

The Anacharsis argument presents a dilemma: if it is the case that anyone judges skillfully, that person must be either skilled or unskilled. But the person who judges skillfully cannot be unskilled, and the skilled person cannot judge those who are skilled. Therefore, it is not the case that anyone judges skillfully. Sextus adapts the argument and applies it to an argument against the criterion. The passage consists of a single dilemma adapted to two different arguments.

The *Zhuang-Zi* passage is more complex. The first part seems to represent in tetralemma the possible outcomes of a two-sided dispute: (1) you win, I lose; (2) I win, you lose; (3) we both win; (4) we both lose. There is, again, no parallel to this part of the argument in the Anacharsis passage. The second part of the argument can be restated: if we are going to come to agreement on something we cannot figure out between us, then we must accept as a judge either a person who agrees with you, or a person who agrees with me. But we cannot accept a person who agrees with you, and we cannot accept a person who agrees with me. Therefore we are not going to come to an agreement on something we cannot figure out between us. It is possible to interpret this part of the *Zhuang-Zi* as a dilemma, as in the Anacharsis argument, but the arguments and the evident purposes of the arguments are different. One shows that no one can judge anything skillfully and that no criterion of judgement is possible. The other shows that anything that cannot be resolved by mutual agreement cannot be resolved by appeal to outside authority, and if we cannot resolve the dispute by mutual agreement then there is no way to distinguish whether you are right and I am wrong, or I am right and you are wrong, or both of us are right, or both of us are wrong.

Now we admit that other interpretations of these passages are possible, but our methodological point is simply this: Beckwith does not carry out a meaningful comparison of the two texts. He simply juxtaposes them and expects others to experience the same thing that he does when gazing upon them, the impression that the texts have the same source.

## 5. THE EVIDENCE FOR PYRRHO IN DIOGENES LAERTIUS

Diogenes Laertius is the only source that explicitly tells of Pyrrho's trip to India:

Pyrrho of Elis was the son of Pleistarchus, as Diocles relates. According to Apollodorus in his *Chronology*, he was first a painter; then he studied under Stilpo's son Bryson: thus Alexander in his *Successions of Philosophers*. Afterwards he joined Anaxarchus, 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 noble philosophy, to

quote Ascanius of Abdera, taking the form of agnosticism and suspension of judgement. He denied that anything was honourable or dishonourable, just or unjust. And so, universally, he held that there is nothing really existent, but custom and convention govern human action; for each thing is in itself no more this than that. (Diogenes Laertius IX.61, translation adapted from Hicks 1925, 2:475)

This testimony is remarkable because it says not only that Pyrrho met with Asians, but that this somehow "led him" to adopt a philosophy defined by agnosticism and suspense of judgment. Diogenes also tells of an important philosophical encounter between Anaxarchus, an Indian, and Pyrrho:

He would withdraw from the world and live in solitude, rarely showing himself to his relatives; this he did because he had heard an Indian reproach Anaxarchus, telling him that he would never be able to teach others what is good while he himself danced attendance on kings in their courts. (Diogenes Laertius IX.63, tr. Hicks 1925, 2:477)

Various aspects of these passages can be debated, but the evidence of Diogenes does suggest a connection between Pyrrho's philosophy and what he and others experienced in Asia. Now let us offer something like a brief status of the question, restricting ourselves to works dedicated to Pyrrho specifically and omitting, as Beckwith does, any discussion of more general works.[15]

We begin with Everard Flintoff, who wrote a seminal article entitled "Pyrrho and India" (1980) not mentioned by Beckwith or included in the bibliography of *Greek Buddha*. Flintoff argued that, in light of Diogenes' testimony, the tendency of scholars to neglect the comparison between Pyrrhonian and Indian ideas was unjustified. Flintoff went on to make some interesting and occasionally compelling comparisons, principally with Madhyamaka Buddhism and Jainism. Flintoff made it clear that he was not "trying to prove that Pyrrho was some kind of Buddhist....but merely that there were many features within Indian thought that might have influenced Pyrrho in the formation of his 'sceptical' philosophy" (97). Beckwith's intention, by contrast, is precisely to show that Pyrrho was a kind of Buddhist.

The issue was thoroughly investigated by Thomas McEvilley in *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (2002). Beckwith (2015, 225 and n21) dismisses McEvilley but does not address his conclusions that are directly pertinent to the question of the source of Pyrrho's ideas. McEvilley came to the conclusion that Pyrrho's ideas could be traced to earlier figures in the Greek tradition, especially Democritus of Abdera and his successor Anaxarchus the Atomist, the teacher whom Pyrrho accompanied on his travels. Beckwith neglects this line of thought, to which we will return in due course.[16]

---

[15] Such as the pioneering article "Sextus Empiricus and Indian Logic" by A. M. Frenkian (1957), mentioned by Beckwith (2015, 255) as cited by another author but not discussed or included in Beckwith's bibliography.

[16] Beckwith's conclusions were effectively pre-empted by McEvilley: "There is a great temptation to say that Pyrrhon imported into Greece alien and pessimistic teachings from the East.... But in fact it seems certain, if one attends to the Greek tradition as a whole, that Pyrrhon must have imbibed the

Flintoff's article inspired Adrian Kuzminski to write an article that was later developed into a monograph entitled *Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism* (2008). Following Flintoff, Kuzminski sees the possibility that "Indian sages" may have influenced Pyrrho (Kuzminski 2008, 35ff.). Given the paucity of evidence, however, Kuzminski concentrates on the later sources for both Pyrrhonism (Diogenes Laertius and Sextus Empiricus) and Buddhism (Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti). Kuzminski acknowledges that these authors wrote hundreds of years after Pyrrho and the Buddha, but he reasonably takes them to be incorporating and synthesizing earlier material. He brings out points of agreement as well as differences, for example the lack in Pyrrhonism of nonverbal meditative practices which are thought to have been important in some forms of Buddhism (54-55). Beckwith says of Kuzminski:

> I discovered his book and article after my work on Pyrrho was already far advanced. His approach is based mainly on comparing Late Pyrrhonism with the teachings of the fully developed Madhyamika school of late Normative Buddhism, so while philosophically interesting and important in its own right, it is in general not relevant to the present work. (Beckwith 2015, 20 n71)

This is an important remark for what it says about Beckwith's method. "Late Pyrrhonism" and "Normative Buddhism" are terms used to refer to traditions whose doctrines and writings, as Beckwith understands them, were formulated centuries after Pyrrho and the Buddha lived. Beckwith intends to refrain from using these sources as much as possible because, again, his thesis is about the direct influence of "Early" or "Pre-Normative" Buddhism on Pyrrho. By methodically focusing on what he thinks is "Early" or "Pre-Normative," Beckwith avoids engaging with important scholarship that bears on the issue he is discussing. This also allows him to avoid discussing texts that can be relegated to the category of "Late" or "Normative," unless of course such texts can be mined for data to support his claims. Beckwith's approach to comparative philosophy therefore will not be of much interest to those whose primary interest is in the philosophical arguments of either the Pyrrhonists or the Buddhists. This is unfortunate, perhaps, but Beckwith's studied avoidance of inconvenient philosophical analysis makes it relatively easy to assess his central argument, because the main evidence he adduces for Pyrrho's thought comes down to a single fragment.

---

main attitudes of his philosophy from Greek teachers, before the visit to India. The position he came to teach was clearly in the Democritean lineage" (McEvilley 2002, 492). "….the essentials of Pyrrhonism were already to be found among the followers of Socrates and Democritus in the late fifth and early fourth centuries B.C., well before Alexander's visit to India. If Pyrrhon encountered such doctrines in India, they must simply have reminded him of doctrines that had been common in Greece for a hundred and fifty years and which his own teachers had taught him" (McEvilley 2002, 495). Cf. Kuzminski 2008, 48-50.

## 6. THE EVIDENCE FOR PYRRHO IN ARISTOCLES OF MESSENE

Beckwith's thinking on "Early Pyrrhonism" is anchored to what he describes as "the single most important testimony" for Pyrrho (22), a text purportedly by Aristocles of Messene (ca. 2nd c. CE). We have provided a more complete translation than Beckwith gives, and divided it into parts (A) − (E) for reference in our subsequent discussion.

> (A) It is necessary above all to consider our own knowledge; for if it is our nature to know nothing, there is no need to enquire any further into other things. There were some among the ancients, too, who made this statement, whom Aristotle has argued against. Pyrrho of Elis was also a powerful advocate of such a position. He himself had left nothing in writing, his pupil Timon, however, says that it is necessary for anyone who is to be happy to consider these three things: first, what things are like by nature; second, in what way we should be disposed towards them; and lastly, what will be the profit for those who do this.
>
> (B) Timon says that Pyrrho showed that things (*ta pragmata*) are equally undifferentiated (*adiaphora*), unstable (*astathmêta*), and indeterminate (*anepikrita*).
>
> (C) On account of this, neither our sensations or our opinions tell the truth or lie.
>
> (D) Therefore it is necessary not to trust them, but to be unopinionated (*adoxastous*), impartial (*aklineis*), and unwavering (*akradantous*), saying about each thing that it no more is than is not, or both is and is not, or neither is nor is not.
>
> (E) For those disposed in this way, Timon says that first there will be speechlessness (*aphasian*), then undisturbedness (*ataraxian*), and Aenesidemus says pleasure (*hêdonên*).[17]

Beckwith says little about section (A). This section shows that what follows is not a verbatim fragment of Pyrrho: first, because it reminds us that Pyrrho wrote nothing, and second because the account is attributed to his pupil Timon of Phlius (ca. 320-230 BCE). But the whole passage hangs on an even longer and more complicated chain of literary dependence. The immediate source of the passage is Eusebius' *Preparation for the Gospels* (*Praeparatio evangelica,* 4th c. CE). In this work Eusebius quotes the peripatetic Aristocles already mentioned. Section (A), seen in context, makes it clear that Aristocles was hostile to scepticism, which is why he was quoted by the church father Eusebius. We have here a hostile source, preserving an account from another hostile source, probably based on the Pyrrhonist Aenesidemus of Knossos (1st century BCE), of Timon's recollections of the unwritten teachings of Pyrrho. Needless to say, this is not a very solid basis for attributing anything definite to Pyrrho.

Beckwith asserts that Aristocles' source is Timon's lost dialogue *Pytho*.[18] D. L. Clayman, the recent editor of Timon, points out that Aristocles does not mention

---

*Pytho* in this context (although he does in a later report), and that the reference to Aenesidemus at the conclusion shows that either Aenesidemus "was the sole source or there was more than one" (Clayman 2009, 54). M. L. Chiesara, the recent editor of Aristocles, presents several detailed arguments that "strongly support the hypothesis that Aenesidemus, or a Pyrrhonian epitomator very close to him, was Aristocles' source for most of his chapter on the Pyrrhonians" (Chiesara 2001, 136). R. Polito, the recent editor of Aenesidemus, also argues that Aenesidemus was most likely Aristocles' source (Polito 2014, 290). Given that these editors, who have studied most closely the sources of Timon, Aristocles, and Aenesidemus, have all come to the conclusion that Aenesidemus is most likely the intermediate source of the passage, one would expect Beckwith to offer a detailed account of how Aenesidemus modified and adapted Pyrrho's teachings to his own purposes.[19] Beckwith himself says that Aenesidemus invented a "reformed" Pyrrhonism (Beckwith 2015, 185), but his inclination is both to dismiss the influence of Aenesidemus and to defer special study of the topic.[20]

It is worth noting that Aristocles says nothing about Pyrrho having learned his views from an Indian source, even though Aristocles was interested enough in Indian philosophy to have reported a claim that Socrates learned a certain argument from an Indian:

> And Aristoxenus the musician said that this argument comes from the Indians. For a man of that people met Socrates in Athens and asked him what his philosophy was about; and when he said that he was investigating human life, the Indian laughed at him, saying that no one could understand human affairs if he ignored the divine. Whether this is true, no one can say for sure. (Aristocles, Fragment 1.8-9, tr. Chiesara 2001, 11)

---

[18] See Beckwith 2015, 17 n61. Beckwith acknowledges that the Aristocles passage "must reflect the artistic hand of Timon," but nonetheless he can tell that "it really does reflect Pyrrho's own thought" because of its "strikingly distinctive character and its consistency with other testimonies" (ibid.).

[19] Polito 2014, 5-7 usefully summarizes differences between "early Pyrrhonism" and Aenesidemus' "neo-Pyrrhonism." Polito 2007 provides a detailed account of major discontinuities in the Pyrrhonist and sceptical tradition, including those initiated by Aenesidemus. See also Bett 2000, 190-232.

[20] See Beckwith 2015, 181 n2; 215 n115. In the latter note Beckwith states: "the idea that Aristocles based his treatment of Pyrrho on Aenesidemus (Chiesara 2001: 126-136)…is not believable." Beckwith also rejects Jacques Brunschwig's contention that "Timon, not Pyrrho, actually created what we know as 'sceptical' Pyrrhonism" (Beckwith 2015, 183), but he adds: "Others argue, somewhat similarly, that Aenesidemus performed the same task a century or so later. Both ideas are connected to the question of the continuity of Pyrrho's thought into Late Pyrrhonism. Despite examination of that issue by a number of scholars, many serious problems remain. This appendix shows that he was in some important respects closer philosophically to Sextus Empiricus than to Aenesidemus…but the topic requires reexamination in a specialized study" (183 n13). Specialized studies, we note, have been done: in the context of *Greek Buddha*, as far as we can tell, the main reason why these studies are unsatisfying and other scholars are not "believable" is because others cannot see that Pyrrho has a "system" that amounts to a form of "Early Buddhism." As we show in what follows, Beckwith's vision of Pyrrho in relation to early Buddhism cannot be accepted. To the extent that his criticism of other scholarship proceeds from that vision, it is to be discounted accordingly.

There are other sources for this report,[21] as well as room for doubt about the facticity of the story. But surely Aristocles would have mentioned that Pyrrho's philosophy had been adopted from Indians had there been even a dubious rumor to this effect, as this would have afforded Aristocles another opportunity to exhibit the exemplary caution about Indian influences on Greek philosophy that he shows in the case of his report about Socrates. Beckwith does not seem to notice that Aristocles, an outstandingly important source for his own argument, elsewhere discusses claims about comparative philosophy and historical contacts and is rightly sceptical about such claims.

Beckwith focuses his account of the Aristocles passage on section (B) as the view of Pyrrho in which three adjectives are predicated of *ta pragmata*: *adiaphora*, *astathmêta* and *anepikrita*. Multi-word glosses for each of these terms are provided, resulting in the following: "As for *pragmata* 'matters, questions, topics', they are all *adiaphora* 'undifferentiated by a logical differentia' and *astathmēta* 'unstable, unbalanced, not measurable' and *anepikrita* 'unjudged, unfixed, undecidable'" (Beckwith 2015, 23).

Beckwith's first task is to determine what Pyrrho would have meant by *ta pragmata*. Beckwith glosses *ta pragmata* as "matters, questions, topics" (23), using three technical terms of logic. The translators of Timon, Aristocles, and Eusebius all opt for the less technical "things" (compare glosses of *pragma* in the LSJ: "deed, act"; "occurrence, matter, affair"; "thing, concrete reality"). Beckwith gives no reason to suppose that *pragmata* should have a technical logical meaning in this context. He sees, rather, an ethical meaning in the text, and he immediately re-glosses *ta pragmata* as "ethical matters or questions" (23). This re-gloss is then further re-glossed as "(ethical) things, affairs, questions" (32), or simply as "(ethical) things" (29). Beckwith makes a case for this understanding of *pragmata* in Appendix A and elsewhere in *Greek Buddha*, and what he has to say is not without interest. The problem, for us, is that his reasoning involves amazingly confident assertions such as: "Pyrrho's use of *pragmata* is exactly equivalent to the Buddha's use of *dharmas*; in both thinkers the reference is primarily to ethically or emotionally conflicting 'things,' i.e., 'matters'" (193 n45). To anticipate what we will say later: what would it mean for Beckwith's thesis if he is wrong or fails to substantiate his claims about "the Buddha's use of *dharmas*"?

As for *adiaphora*, Beckwith holds that although it literally means "undifferentiated by a logical differentia" (compare the less technical LSJ glosses: "not different"; "indistinguishable"; "indifferent"), it should be understood as "without a logical self-identity" (26). For support he cites a passage in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, but Aristotle and Pyrrho are unlikely to have had the same topic in mind. Beckwith's explanation of the philosophical idea that he sees lying behind the term is also questionable: "Because *pragmata* themselves do not actually have differentiae…*we ourselves* necessarily supply the differentiae. But that makes the entire process strictly circular and therefore logically invalid" (27). There is no reason

---

[21] [Plato], *Axiochus* 371a; [Aristotle] *apud* Diogenes Laertius II.45 (= fragment 32 Rose).

given why the fact that *we ourselves* supply differentiae shows that "the entire process" is "strictly circular." Nonetheless, Beckwith sees important consequences from his reading of the text: "A direct consequence of the teaching of *adiaphora* 'without a logical differentia, no self-identity' is the explicit denial of the validity of opposed categories…." (27). Here note, again, how *adiaphora* has been transformed into a term concerning "self-identity." This improved sense of *adiaphora* is so important to Beckwith that he will summarily gloss *adiaphora* as the bare adjectival phrase: "*Without a Self-Identity*" (26). The reader soon understands why this move is necessary.

Beckwith offers explanations of the terms *astathmêta* and *anepikrita* that are relatively short but relentless in their determination to wrest particular meanings from the ambiguous Greek text. For Beckwith it is almost a rule that a text never means what it says, but its terms must be glossed and glossed again, so that finally meaning is located not in the text but in the paraphrase or the explanation. And so we are finally told that *anepikrita* means that "*pragmata* are not permanently decided or fixed" (28), and one wonders whence the idea of permanence entered the discussion. As for *astathmêta*, what this finally means is that *pragamata* "make us feel uneasy and susceptible to passions and disturbedness" (27).

## 7. THE EVIDENCE FOR THE BUDDHA IN PYRRHO

We now turn to the heart of Beck's comparative enterprise. Besides asserting that the Buddha was a Scythian who practiced a philosophy with little connection to Indian religious or philosophical traditions, Beckwith has prepared for this adventure by promising care with the data and scholarly rigor. He has also set the stage by discussing Pyrrho's "statement" in the Aristocles passage (25-28). Building on that discussion, Beckwith opens his master argument:

> Pyrrho's tripartite statement is completely unprecedented and unparalleled in Greek thought. Yet it is not merely similar to Buddhism, it corresponds closely to a famous statement of the Buddha preserved in canonical texts. (28)

We will return in due course to the issue of whether Pyrrho's "tripartite statement" really is "unparalleled in Greek thought." We also note in passing that it is not so much the canonicity of the "famous statement of the Buddha" that matters, for Beckwith, as the alleged correspondence between it and the content of the Aristocles passage. For Beckwith the Greek text is "hard" data, and because it "corresponds closely to a famous statement of the Buddha" that very same "famous statement" can be considered equally "hard." The "famous statement" is what Beckwith calls the "statement…known as the *Trilakṣaṇa*," which latter term he glosses as "Three Characteristics" (28-29). One small problem is the misleading connotation of the plural "texts" in the above passage, because Beckwith proceeds to adduce and discuss exactly one canonical text in which this "famous statement of the Buddha" is alleged

to be found.[22] Strangely, Beckwith does not quote this all-important text in the original Pāli, and neither does he provide a straightforward translation.[23] Instead, here at the very crux of his entire argument Beckwith offers up a condensed hash of English and Sanskrit. Below we reproduce what he writes in a new and independent paragraph in his text:

> The Buddha says, "All *dharmas* are *anitya* 'impermanent'…. All *dharmas* are *duḥkha* 'unsatisfactory, imperfect, unstable'…. All *dharmas* are *anātman* 'without an innate self-identity'." (29)

This, we are supposed to believe, is the Buddha's famous statement as set forth in the "*Anguttara-nikāya*" [*sic*].[24] But there is nothing in the Pāli to identify the Buddha as the speaker (see below). That the Buddha is the speaker is the supposition of Beckwith and a traditional belief of the sort that he pretends to disdain. But whoever the speaker, the representation of his or her speech is also problematic. The ellipses indicate that some of the passage is not shown, but the reader cannot know what has been left out (in fact the vast majority of the passage) or why it has been left out. Another problem is the single quotation marks, which make it seem as if the speaker is glossing the terms *anitya*, *duḥka*, and *anātman*, somewhat in the manner of a Sanskrit commentary. In fact it is Beckwith who is glossing these terms which are, as we mentioned, in Sanskrit and are thus not found in the Pāli text. We will not speculate on why Beckwith elected to place Sanskrit between the source language (Pāli) and the target language (English). We will say, however, that in terms of method in comparative philosophy this lack of clarity on exactly what terms are under discussion is both unnecessary and unhelpful.

As for the plural "dharmas," on one level this is the unfortunate result of Beckwith's decision to treat Sanskrit *dharma* as one of a few "loanwords in English" (xx). While *dharma* in the sense of "Buddha's teachings" or "cosmic law" or some such meaning might be considered a loanword in English in some quarters, that would not be the meaning in the context of the passage as he presents it. There, if the text has plural forms of Pāli *dhamma* where Beckwith has "dharmas," then it would mean something that most readers would not understand. Hence the need for glossing but, characteristically of Beckwith, it will not be straightforward. Beckwith glosses his term "dharmas" as "ethical distinctions, factors, constituents, etc." Immediately

---

[22] Beckwith (32 n44) also refers to a Gāndhārī text, to which we will return further below.

[23] There is an abbreviated translation of sorts in an accompanying footnote, discussed below.

[24] In an attached footnote Beckwith cites "*Anguttara-nikāya* III, 134" adjacent to an extract from Donald Mitchell's translation of the passage (Beckwith 2015, 29 n30, citing Mitchell 2008, 34). Beckwith gives no edition of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, and neither does he mention any edition in his bibliography. The implications of that absence, along with the way Beckwith reproduces Mitchell's misspelled citation, are disturbing. The numbering suggests that Mitchell translated from the edition published by the Pali Text Society (Morris 1885), as the *sutta* is numbered differently in other important editions such as the one now published online by the Vipassana Research Institute (see http://www.tipitaka.org/romn/cscd/s0402m2.mul13.xml). Apart from minor differences that are irrelevant for this discussion, these two major editions of the text substantially agree.

this gloss is relativized by a further gloss of Sanskrit *dharma* and Pāli *dhamma* as "(ethical) things" (29). This, of course, is what *ta pragmata* is supposed to mean, and we are now told why: *pragmata* "seems to be Pyrrho's equivalent" of Sanskrit *dharma* or Pāli *dhamma* (29). Having made these moves, Beckwith will again and again refer to what the Buddha is supposed to have said about "all dharmas" in his "famous statement," and the equivalent things that Pyrrho supposedly said, and it is the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage that establishes the foundation for what Beckwith has to say on the subject. What he has to say is a lot.[25] But there are two massive problems in Beckwith's treatment of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage that vitiate all his important arguments.

Part of Beckwith's problem is that here in this most crucial phase of his argument he cannot be bothered to consult a Pāli dictionary, and so he does not tell the reader that Pāli *dhamma* is a notoriously difficult word to translate, a word whose definitions in *A Dictionary of Pāli* take up several pages.[26] If Beckwith is aware of plausible meanings and translations for *dhamma* in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage ("constituent of experience," "thing," "matter," "phenomenon," to name only a few possibilities taken from Cone's def. 1.vi), again he does not tell the reader. The meaning "(ethical) things" is simply asserted, so that Beckwith can then say things like: "The 'three characteristics' are said to apply to 'all dharmas'…. But for Buddha, as for Pyrrho, their reference is exclusively to ethical or moral matters, including emotions and other conflicts" (31).

If there are no methodological restraints imposed on this kind of interpretive glossing, if it is allowed for words as general as *dhamma* (or *pragmata*), then it can be used to support almost any interpretation of any text, and to bring disparate texts into close connection, even virtual identity. But there is no textual evidence in either the Aristocles passage or in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage (as we will see) that supports the notion that the three "characteristics" apply only or primarily to ethical things or matters.

In the course of his argument Beckwith discusses each "characteristic" (*lakṣaṇa*) in the *trilakṣaṇa* "statement," namely *anitya*, *duḥkha*, and *anātman*. It is these that are supposed to apply to "all dharmas" (31). The term *anitya* is defined as "impermanent, variable, unfixed."[27] The term *duḥkha*, we are told, "is contested by scholars and actually has no universally accepted basic meaning or etymology" (29). Nevertheless, Beckwith confidently concludes:

---

[25] E.g., "The most important part of Pyrrho's basic teachings reported by Aristocles, his strikingly unusual declaration about the three characteristics of all things, is clearly his interpretation of the Buddha's statement of the *Trilakṣaṇa* 'three characteristics' of all dharmas" (Beckwith 2015, 220).

[26] See Cone, *A Dictionary of Pāli*, s.v. *dhamma*. Most of these pages are devoted to citations from Pāli texts, emphasizing the importance of context in determining the meaning of a given use of *dhamma*.

[27] Beckwith 2015, 29, citing Monier-Williams, the standard Sanskrit-English lexicon.

The most important point here is that *duḥ + stha* literally means 'dis-/bad- + stand-', that is, 'badly standing, unsteady' and is therefore virtually identical to the literal meaning of Greek *astathmēta*, from *a- + sta-* 'not- + stand', both evidently meaning 'unstable'. This strongly suggests that Pyrrho's middle term is in origin a simple calque. (30)

There is no evidence that Pyrrho tried to provide a translation of the foreign term, and the term *astathmêta* was readily available to him (it had already been used by, among others, Xenophon and Plato). Furthermore, the Buddha, or rather the unknown creator of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage, may have used (not the Sanskrit term *duḥkha* nor "*duḥ + stha*" but rather the Pāli term) *dukkha* in some radical etymological sense, or in one of the other senses documented by lexicographers. But there is little substantive discussion of alternative interpretations. Instead, Beckwith moves on to the third "characteristic," *anātman*, now said to mean "no (innate) self (-identity)" (30), whereas the prior gloss was "without an innate self-identity" (29). No lexicon or any other scholar is cited in support. Like a free-floating balloon filled with only hot air, the argument can now go anywhere, and eventually Beckwith will say things such as: "*pragmata* . . . do not have their own innate self-identity (Skt. *anātman*, Greek *adiaphora*)" (92). But all this is embarrassing and uncomfortable to watch, because Beckwith's confusion on whether the term we are dealing with is an adjective or a substantive only reproduces the confusion of the tradition he denigrates (although, as we will see, it did not seem to confuse the creator of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage on which Beckwith bases his entire thesis).

Having identified *pragmata* and "dharmas" with one another, and found a one-to-one relation between each of their "characteristics," Beckwith claims:

> Pyrrho's version of the *Trilakṣaṇa* is so close to the Indian Buddhist one that it is virtually a translation of it: both the Buddha and Pyrrho make a declaration in which they list three logical characteristics of all discrete '(ethical) things, affairs, questions', but they give them exclusively negatively, that is, 'All matters are *non*-x, *non*-y, and *non*-z.' The peculiar way in which the characteristics are presented is thus the same, the main difference being the order of the first and third characteristics. This passage about the three characteristics is thus the absolutely earliest known bit of Buddhist doctrinal *text*. It is firmly dated three centuries earlier than the Gāndhārī texts. (32)

Against this, it must be restated that apart from Beckwith's argument there is no evidence whatsoever that Pyrrho meant to give a "version" or "translation" of the *trilakṣaṇa*. And recall, the source for Aristocles' report is ultimately part of a speculative account of what Timon learned from Pyrrho (probably invented or adapted by Aenesidemus). Thus, it is disputable whether the Aristocles passage should be considered a text of Pyrrho, much less a text of Buddhism. It would be more accurate to describe it as a *testimonium* about the views of Pyrrho, or better yet an *imitation*, which in theory could be used to make an interesting comparison with Buddhist texts, but no such attempt is made. Instead, Beckwith would like to take the alleged similarity of the Aristocles and *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passages as the basis for his interpretation of both the Buddha and Pyrrho. According to Beckwith, the Buddha in

a Pāli text is said to hold that "all dharmas" are *anitya*, *duḥkha*, and *anātman* (three Sanskrit terms). According to a contextually unrelated Greek text, Pyrrho is said to hold that all *pragmata* are *anepikrita*, *astathmêta* and *adiaphora* (the terms reordered corresponding to the parallelisms perceived by Beckwith). We are supposed to conclude from this that the Greek text is the "absolutely earliest" evidence for what the Buddha said. But the argument depends on the overlapping glosses that Beckwith has given to all the terms in question. By giving an overly technical, logical translation of *adiaphora*, he is able to relate that term to his interpretation of *anātman*. By giving an etymology of *duḥkha* he is able to relate it to the etymological meaning of the Greek term *astathmêta*. And by giving some lexicon glosses of *anepikrita* he is able to relate it to a lexicon gloss of the term *anitya*. Combine this with the reduction of *ta pragmata* to "(ethical) things," add an arbitrary account of Sanskrit *dharma* and Pāli *dhamma* as also meaning "(ethical) things" (29), and the comparison is complete: an identity of the texts is established, and one is shown to be "virtually a translation" of the other.[28]

Now one major problem to which we referred is the meaning of *anātman*, according to Beckwith, in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage. But even to put it this way is already to commit an error: the text is in Pāli and that is the language in which one has to deal if one is to have any hope of understanding the passage. The relevant Pāli term is *anattā*, a declined form of the stem *anatta(n)*. Unfortunately for Beckwith and his readers, his understanding of this part of the text is quite deficient according to what Pāli and Sanskrit scholars who have studied the meaning of *anattā* have to say on the subject, and as a consequence his understanding of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage is confused. In the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage the relevant phrase is *sabbe dhammā anattā* (see below). Recall that here in his central argument Beckwith understands the Sanskrit stem *anātman* (for the declined Pāli *anattā*) to be an adjective "without an innate self-identity" (29). But already in 1875 the lexicographer Robert Caesar Childers recognized that *anattā* is a not an adjective but a masculine substantive: "Not a self, not a soul."[29] So too Oskar Frankfurter, who defined *anattā* as: "(m.), not a self" (Frankfurter 1883, 154). More importantly for present purposes, the contemporary Pāli lexicographer Margaret Cone cites (among other examples) an exact parallel to the relevant phrase in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage (*sabbe dhammā anattā*) to define *anatta(n)* not as an adjective, but as a negative form of the substantive *atta(n)* and therefore: "not the self, not a soul."[30] For Cone, as for Frankfurter, as for Childers, *anattā* is a masculine substantive, and Cone's definition in particular would seem to be a pointed rejection of definitions that take *anattā* in *sabbe dhammā anattā* for an adjective.[31] Another important lexicon, the online

---

[28] To return to a point of method: as we see it the heart of Beckwith's comparison is not between the "systems" of Pyrrho and the Buddha; it is between ensembles of a few terms. We do not deny that a comparison of terms could be useful in a discussion of Pyrrhonism and Buddhism, but in the end Beckwith's methods must be judged by their results (on which see below).
[29] Childers, *A Dictionary of the Pali Language*, s.v. *anattā*.
[30] Cone, *A Dictionary of Pāli*, s.v. *atta(n)*.
[31] E.g. Rhys Davids and Stede, *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, s.v. *attan*.

*Critical Pāli Dictionary*, defines *an-atta(n)* similarly as a masculine substantive meaning "not self."[32] But this article also indicates that the commentarial tradition – this would be Beckwith's "Normative Buddhism" – came to construe *anattā* as a kind of compound that can be used as an adjective, and from this clue one can already begin to see where Beckwith went wrong (and why some Pāli lexicographers accept the secondary, adjectival reading of *anattā*). Richard Gombrich, former President of the Pali Text Society and former Boden Professor of Sanskrit at the University of Oxford, has discussed how *anattā* has been misunderstood:

> The third hallmark is very often mistranslated (sometimes by me too, in the past) as 'not having a self or essence'. That is indeed how later Buddhists came to interpret it, but that was not its original meaning….the word means '*is* not *ātman*' rather than 'does not *have ātman*'. (Gombrich 2013, 70)

The noted philologist and former president of the Pali Text Society, K. R. Norman, has also written on the subject of why *anattā* in the phrase *sabbe dhammā anattā* should be translated as "not self," noting that Pāli grammar and syntax dictate that adjectival translations "such as 'without self' and 'having no soul' cannot be correct" (Norman 2008, 35-36). Norman adds:

> We are not to regard these things as part of the self, and to clarify the point the Buddha asked his followers whether, when they saw wood being burned, they felt any pain. The answer was 'No', and the explanation given was that they did not feel any pain because the wood was not part of the self. (36)

The scholar and translator Glenn Wallis likewise helps us see what was at stake in these ancient debates, through his translation of several "x *anattā*" statements in the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*: "The body does not constitute a self…. Feeling does not constitute a self…. Perception does not constitute a self…." (text and translation Wallis 2010, 146, 305). For what is often at stake in these ancient debates concerns above all the self, not the nature of a given x. Anyone who neglects the Indic sources is apt to misunderstand the issues they address and how they do so. Fortunately, Johannes Bronkhorst (2009, 123ff.) provides a very useful discussion on the topic, paying careful attention to the Sanskrit and the differing Pāli morphology. He notes that the "singular substantive" *anattā* in the phrase *sabbe dhammā anattā* means "not self" in the sense "all the dharmas…are not the self" (124 and n281). That clear formulation is worth re-reading and keeping in mind. Bronkhorst also points out how different Buddhist understandings or misunderstandings of the relevant terms, enabled by confusion in Pāli morphology that is "impossible" in Sanskrit (124), allowed "an important change in the Buddhist worldview" to take place: "the difference between 'the dharmas are not the self' and 'the dharmas are without self' is

---

[32] See http://cpd.uni-koeln.de/search?article_id=3679.

highly significant."[33] What all this means is that although Beckwith stretches *anattā* from the later Buddhist tradition's "without self" to his own "without an innate self-identity" (Beckwith 2015, 29), he remains the one standing on their shoulders, as it were, unawares. And this leads to another point about theory and method. For of course it is possible that the experts are wrong about *anattā*.[34] Our point is not that the case is forever closed, but that Beckwith has not even attempted to make a case for why the experts are wrong, which they must be if he is not. Until Beckwith shows the experts are wrong or otherwise incorporates their understanding of the relevant Pāli into his analysis of the text, he can lay no claim to the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage on which he has ventured so much.

It is possible that Beckwith has been led astray by an abbreviated translation of the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage in which Pāli *anattā* is translated, incorrectly, as "lacking a permanent self."[35] As we have seen, it actually means "not self" in the sense that the things in question are "not the self." But at this point let us turn from error and look at a text and competent translation of the entire passage from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*:

> 1. *Uppādā vā bhikkhave Tathāgatānaṃ anuppādā vā Tathāgatānaṃ ṭhitā vā sā dhātu dhammaṭṭhitatā dhammaniyāmatā sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā. Taṃ Tathāgato abhisambujjhati abhisameti abhisambujjhitvā abhisametvā ācikkhati deseti paññāpeti paṭṭhapeti vivarati vibhajati uttānīkaroti sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā ti.*
>
> 2. *Uppādā vā bhikkhave Tathāgatānaṃ anuppādā vā Tathāgatānaṃ ṭhitā vā sā dhātu dhammaṭṭhitatā dhammaniyāmatā sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā. Taṃ Tathāgato abhisaṃbujjhati abhisameti abhisambujjhitvā abhisametvā ācikkhati <deseti> paññāpeti paṭṭhapeti vivarati vibhajati uttānīkaroti sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā ti.*
>
> 3. *Uppādā vā bhikkhave Tathāgatānaṃ anuppādā vā Tathāgatānaṃ ṭhitā vā sā dhātu dhammaṭṭhitatā dhammaniyāmatā sabbe dhammā anattā. Taṃ Tathāgato*

---

[33] Bronkhorst 2009, 125. It is useful to read Collins 1999, 95-96 and 278nn alongside Bronkhorst. Collins favors the translation "not-self" (96) while acknowledging that in *sabbe dhammā anattā* the latter can be interpreted differently, as an adjective. That it can be or has been is not in dispute; the question is when and how the different understandings arose. Bronkhorst goes beyond Collins in providing a clear sense of priority (the substantive reading) and change (adjectival reading). It is the adjectival reading which became the "popular interpretation" (Chowdhury 1955, 53). See also Wynne's discussion of the "transformation of 'not-self' into 'no self'" (Wynne 2015, 85ff.).

[34] The authors accept expert opinion on the meaning of *anattā* because we think they have a superior grasp of the subject, not because we are committed to upholding a particular theory of the history of Buddhism. In that scholarship does and should proceed by conjecture and refutation, we would be happy if the experts are decisively refuted by Beckwith or anyone else. Until then we provisionally accept their findings.

[35] Beckwith (2015, 29 n30) quotes part of an already severely truncated translation of the text (actually more of a paraphrase) in Donald W. Mitchell's introductory textbook on Buddhism (Mitchell 2008, 34). And here too there are problems (apart from Mitchell's mistranslation of *anattā*). Beckwith misquotes "unsatisfactory" where Mitchell has "dissatisfactory." More significantly, he says that Mitchell's "constituents" translates *dharmā* (which is not in the text) and *dhammā*, but he fails to notice that Mitchell has collapsed the difference between *saṅkhārā* and *dhammā* (see below).

*abhisambujjhati abhisameti abhisambujjhitvā abhisametvā ācikkhati deseti paññāpeti paṭṭhapeti vivarati vibhajati uttānīkaroti sabbe dhammā anattā ti.*[36]

(1) "Bhikkhus, whether Tathāgatas arise or not, there persists that law, that stableness of the Dhamma, that fixed course of the Dhamma: 'All conditioned phenomena are impermanent.' A Tathāgata awakens to this and breaks through to it, and then he explains it, teaches it, proclaims it, establishes it, discloses it, analyzes it, and elucidates it thus: 'All conditioned phenomena are impermanent.'

(2) "Bhikkhus, whether Tathāgatas arise or not, there persists that law, that stableness of the Dhamma, that fixed course of the Dhamma: 'All conditioned phenomena are suffering.' A Tathāgata awakens to this and breaks through to it, and then he explains it, teaches it, proclaims it, establishes it, discloses it, analyzes it, and elucidates it thus: 'All conditioned phenomena are suffering.'

(3) "Bhikkhus, whether Tathāgatas arise or not, there persists that law, that stableness of the Dhamma, that fixed course of the Dhamma: 'All phenomena are non-self.' A Tathāgata awakens to this and breaks through to it, and then he explains it, teaches it, proclaims it, establishes it, discloses it, analyzes it, and elucidates it thus: 'All phenomena are non-self.'" (tr. Bodhi 2012, 363-364).

With a full text and translation finally before us we can make some further remarks. First, there is no "famous statement" of the *trilakṣaṇa* here. The Buddha's "statement" as Beckwith imagines it is an abstraction from what is actually an anonymous discourse set within an unknown context. And notice too that whereas Beckwith would have us believe that each "characteristic" in the *trilakṣaṇa* applies to "all dharmas," the text mentions all *dhammā* only in connection with the third characteristic or mark.[37] The text of the third paragraph is quite clear on this point: *sabbe dhammā anattā*. The other two characteristics or marks apply not to "all dharmas" but to something else, something the text calls *saṅkhārā*: in the first paragraph *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā* and in the second *sabbe saṅkhārā dukkhā*. Thus Bodhi translates the relevant parts of the first, second, and third paragraphs respectively: "All conditioned phenomena are impermanent," "All conditioned phenomena are suffering," and "All phenomena are non-self." The wording reflects the Pāli, whereas Beckwith's presentation of the passage does not. And thus the second major problem of which we spoke: the three characteristics or marks in the Buddha's imagined "famous statement" do not apply to "all dharmas" after all. Rather, what we have are assertions about "all conditioned phenomena" (*sabbe saṅkhārā*) and "all phenomena" (*sabbe dhammā*). The former are impermanent and painful, the latter are not the self. This is certainly not what Pyrrho is supposed to have said!

---

[36] From the Pali Text Society edition by Morris (1885, 286). Where the published text has Latin circumflex diacritics (e.g. â) we have used the more contemporary macron (e.g. ā). The printed text omits *deseti* ("teaches") in the second paragraph, which may be an unacknowledged mistake. We have placed *<deseti>* in the 2nd paragraph to correspond with Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation.

[37] If "characteristic" confuses because it suggests that *anattā* is an adjective, then it may be helpful to recall that the underlying Sanskrit term *lakṣaṇa* means also "mark" or "sign."

These points effectively nullify Beckwith's attempt to link the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage to the Aristocles passage, and thus nullify his entire argument as he has structured it. Beyond these points, however, let us note that the speaker relates the ideas in the passage to individuals identified by the term *tathāgata*. Again it is tradition which asserts that the Buddha is the speaker in our passage, apparently using the term *tathāgata* to refer implicitly to himself. As the translator Bhikkhu Bodhi explains, in these texts the Buddha is "referring to himself not simply as a unique individual but as the latest representative of the 'dynasty' of Buddhas, those extraordinary beings who appear at rare intervals in the cosmic process to rediscover the lost path to nibbāna and teach it to the world" (Bodhi 2012, 27). But whatever the significance of *tathāgata*, it would be hard to find a parallel in Pyrrho. Note too that the speaker refers three times to "that law" (*sā dhātu*), each time linking it to "stableness of the Dhamma" (*dhammaṭṭhitatā*) and "fixed course of the Dhamma" (*dhammaniyāmatā*). Prima facia, the nature of that linkage is not entirely clear: we may be dealing with three laws, or three parts or principles (possible meanings of *dhātu*) of a single law, the Dhamma. One wonders, then: what is or would be the status of these concepts in Beckwith's interpretation? Are they comparable to anything attributable to Pyrrho? And, in case it needs to be said, there is nothing whatever in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage to suggest that *sabbe dhammā* (or *sabbe saṅkhārā*) is meant to indicate only or primarily ethical things or matters.

Beckwith has presented a severely elided and inaccurate version of a passage from the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, evidently because in this form it gives the appearance of mirroring part (B) of the Aristocles passage. But this cannot possibly yield a valid philosophical comparison between the two texts, and the result is, accordingly, totally unconvincing. A comparison of the Aristocles and *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passages quoted fully and properly translated does not reveal them to correspond "closely" (28) or provide any justification for the claim that "Pyrrhonism and Buddhism…match down to details" (44) – even though one may see that there are possibly fruitful philosophical comparisons that could be made between the texts, or between the Aristocles passage and other Buddhist texts.[38]

Beckwith proceeds to emphasize the importance of the *trilakṣaṇa*, which is "not just any piece of Buddhist teaching. It is at the center of Buddhist *practice*, which is

---

[38] It is axiomatic that comparison is between "things" that are different. Consequently an effective comparison must manipulate not only similarities but differences for some stated intellectual purpose. Staying with the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passage as an example, it is part of a much larger text, the entire *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, which contains thousands of suttas on myriad topics arranged by "number" (our passage comes from the "Book of the Threes"). One might wonder, then, how Pyrrho's philosophy does or does not relate to the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*'s organization of teachings on action, causes, cosmology, mind, rebirth, faith, friendship, generosity, morality, death, sexuality, anger, wisdom, types of persons, etc. (see Bodhi 2012, 75-84). Beckwith knows that some "Elements of Early Buddhism" such as "good and bad karma" and "knowledge of causes" cannot be attributed to Pyrrho (Beckwith 2015, 164-165). But his attempt to deal with such differences is unsuccessful because it rests on the untenable assumption that the Aristocles and *Aṅguttara-nikāya* passages are versions of the same teaching. Since this assumption cannot be accepted, a new basis for comparison between Pyrrho's thought and Buddhism would need to be found.

agreed to be the heart and soul of living Buddhism of any kind" (32). But because he shows little sign of understanding *trilakṣaṇa*-related controversies, Beckwith's judgement of what is "agreed" carries little weight.[39] And likewise his judgement that "insight meditation" is "evidently the oldest, but certainly the single most important of the different kinds and stages of Buddhist meditation" (32). Beckwith tries to get us to see the connection between "insight meditation" and his mistaken explication of the *trilakṣaṇa* in a block quotation from Rupert Gethin (a scholar of Buddhism and the current president of the Pali Text Society) describing the purpose of insight meditation. Now all this is ironic because in the passage quoted Gethin correctly translates *anattā* in the phrase "they are not self" (Gethin 1998, 187; quoted in Beckwith 2015, 33), but his discussion is doctrinal rather than historical, philological, or tied to any specific text, and he comments: "The point at which a meditator actively turns to the contemplation of phenomena as impermanent, suffering, and not self is not fixed either for the ancient manuals or in modern practice" (Gethin 1998, 188). Beckwith has missed the significance of what Gethin actually wrote and, since there is no "hard data" here, he has found significance where according to his own rules there should be none.

To shore up his argument Beckwith immediately invokes the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta*, or rather part of it translated by Bronkhorst.[40] The text is not discussed in detail, because the chief thing that matters about it is the following extract:

---

[39] As for the Gāndhārī text mentioned above, in which Beckwith claims that the "statement of the *Trilakṣaṇa* is attested," Beckwith here invokes Stefan Baums' translation of the terms *aṇica*, *dukha*, and *aṇatva* in a Gāndhārī text, "which he translates traditionally as 'impermanent, painful and without self'" (Beckwith 2015, 32 n44, citing Baums 2009, 251, 302, 406; in fact the quoted translation is from 406 alone). Now, firstly, it must be noted that the Gāndhārī text in question is a commentary, and it does not directly attribute the three characteristics or marks to "all dharmas" or the Gāndhārī equivalent thereof: see Baums 2009 for the text transcribed (251), reconstructed (282), translated (302), transcribed and reconstructed (404), and finally presented in translation again (405) with notes (406). And whatever Baums may have written in 2009, the Gāndhārī dictionary that he and Andrew Glass now maintain online defines *anatva* (variant sp. *aṇatva*) only as a masculine substantive: "not a self" (see Baums and Glass, *A Dictionary of Gāndhārī*, s.v. *anatva*). One therefore wonders about the meaning of the Gāndhārī text to which Beckwith refers. But in fact Beckwith has quoted not from Baums' translation or annotated translation of the Gāndhārī text, but from Baums' notes dealing with "The explanation of *saṅkhā-* in the Pali Niddesa" (406). The latter, we should point out, is a canonical commentary on parts of the *Suttanipāta*, and it is topical because, as Baums indicates, the Gāndhārī text resembles parts of the Niddesa in some intriguing ways. Beckwith's blunder here is on one level unimportant given the way Baums translates *aṇatva* in the Gāndhārī text as "without self" (302, 405); but on another level it shows how Beckwith has seized desperately on wording that seems to support his argument, whereas in reality the Gāndhārī text in question does not deal with "the *Trilakṣaṇa*" but with enumerating "the five categories" (tr. Baums 2009, 302, 405; cp. 403). The interesting questions, as we see the matter, are whether Baums' 2009 translation of *aṇatva* is correct in its own context, and if the Niddesa and Gāndhārī texts together may shed light on the way *anattā* and related forms came to be understood in different ways by the tradition (see Bronkhorst 2009, 123ff.). Far from supporting Beckwith's argument, Baums' valuable work raises questions that Beckwith has signally failed to perceive, let alone address.

[40] Beckwith 2015, 33 n48 cites Bronkhorst 1986, 17. The same translation (verbatim as quoted by Beckwith) appears in the reprinted Indian edition (Bronkhorst 2000, 24) to which we have access. For the Pāli text (not mentioned by Beckwith) see Trenckner 1888, 237-251 = M i 237-251.

As a result of abandoning bliss, and abandoning pain, as a result of the earlier disappearance of cheerfulness and dejection, I reached the Fourth Dhyāna, which is free from pain and bliss, the complete purity of equanimity and attentiveness, and resided [there]. (tr. Bronkhorst, quoted in Beckwith 2015, 33)

This is all Beckwith gives of a discourse that runs to twelve pages in the standard English translation.[41] This extract is then explained by Beckwith as follows: "What the Buddha is abandoning here is the *distinction between the opposite qualities* or antilogies that are mentioned" (33). The tendentiousness of Beckwith's representation of the text becomes apparent when one consults the un-shown remainder, the next line of which reads: "Even such a blissful experience, Aggivessana, when it happened to me, did not completely take hold of my mind."[42] That is, despite what the Buddha says about abandoning bliss etc. he does not abandon the concept of "bliss" (*sukha*) when describing his experience. And whatever that "blissful experience" (*sukhā vedanā*) was, it was something that "did not completely take hold" of the Buddha's mind (*cittaṁ na pariyādāya tiṭṭhati*). Thus, the text is far from clear on what exactly was abandoned and the degree to which it was abandoned. The Buddha goes on to describe how he gained other forms of knowledge, all illustrated with the lush use of oppositions: he saw "beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate" (tr. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2005, 341). And later: "This was the third true knowledge attained by me in the last watch of the night. Ignorance was banished and true knowledge arose, darkness was banished and light arose…. But such pleasant feeling that arose in me did not invade my mind and remain" (tr. Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2005, 342). The Buddha does not abandon distinctions between opposites, he relies on them to speak about his experience.[43]

Ignoring what the Pāli text actually says and preferring his own unwarranted explanation of it, Beckwith rushes to yet more judgment – with so much glossing that the result positively gleams:

This is Pyrrho's *adiaphora* state of being 'undifferentiated, without (an intrinsic) self-identity', which is identical to the Buddha's state of being *anātman* 'without (an intrinsic) self-identity'. It is equated with nirvana (*nirvāṇa* or *nirodha*) 'extinguishing (of the burning of the passions)', and the peace that results from it. In the terms of the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta*, 'being free from both pain and bliss' means the state of *apatheia* 'passionlessness', while "complete equanimity" is exactly the same thing as *ataraxia*. As Timon says, the result of following Pyrrho's program is first *apatheia* 'passionlessness', and then *ataraxia* 'undisturbedness, equanimity'— nirvana. (Beckwith 2015, 33)

---

[41] See Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2005, 332-343.
[42] Tr. Bronkhorst 2000, 24. The Pāli reads: *Evarūpā pi kho me Aggivessana uppannā sukhā vedanā cittaṁ na pariyādāya tiṭṭhati* (Trenckner 1888, 247).
[43] When speaking of the Buddha in Buddhist texts he is for us no more or less than a character in them. Whether such texts can be tied to the so-called historical Buddha is another question.

But this is hopelessly confused and confusing. Note the passive "it is equated," which obscures both the referent of "it" and the identity of the party doing the equating (which would be Beckwith). And it cannot literally be true that "in the terms of the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta*" a set of terms *means* the state of *apatheia*, because the author of that text (who would be the source of the meaning) did not use that Greek term. He or she used Pāli terms. Whether the Greek and Pāli terms can be translated into each other is another question, but that question is neither raised nor answered. Rather it is assumed that the meanings are identical, though Beckwith stumbles again in identifying the words of the Buddhist text as Sanskrit terms.[44] Furthermore, does the expression "state of being…without (an intrinsic) self-identity" make any sense? How can states of being not be identical to themselves? How can anything lack an intrinsic self-identity? And note too that the explanation hinges on the meaning of *anātman*, which is of course a stand-in for a Pāli word (*anattā*) that in its context Beckwith did not understand. In order to venture a comparison of the Buddha with Pyrrho we would think some serious research into Greek and Buddhist moral psychology would be in order. Unfortunately, rather than raising questions that stay faithful to the Greek and Pāli texts, Beckwith has synthesized an outlandish scenario out of gloss and misunderstanding.

Continuing his synthesis, Beckwith turns to section (C) of the Aristocles passage and again offers up far-fetched conclusions:

> Because differentiae and other criteria are provided by human minds, and ethical 'matters, affairs, topics' are by nature unstable and unfixed, both our inductive knowledge (based on perceptions) and our deductive knowledge (views, theories, or arguments, even if based on purely internal logical calculation) must be circular, and therefore logically invalid and fatally defective in general. (34)

It does not seem reasonable to us to read this into the Greek text, section (C) of which says nothing about differentiae, criteria, "ethical" matters, affairs, or topics, induction, deduction, arguments, or logical calculation. Furthermore, Beckwith describes Pyrrho's position as a "rejection of the antilogy of *the Truth* versus *the Lie*" (34), but section (C) only says: "On account of this, neither our sensations or our opinions tell the truth or lie." This does not mean that Pyrrho rejects the distinction between truth and lying, he says nothing here about "antilogy," and there is no evidence to justify reifying the concepts of truth and lying into capitalized, italicized expressions:

> Pyrrho's rejection of the antilogy of *the Truth* versus *the Lie* hearkens back to the fundamental antilogy, repeated over and over in the early Avesta and the early Old Persian inscriptions, between *Asha* or *Arta* 'the Truth', supported by Heavenly God, Ahura Mazda 'Lord Wisdom', versus *Druj* 'the Lie'. (34)

---

[44] Beckwith (2015, 33 n49) refers to Bronkhorst's "translation of Skt. *sukha*" in the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta*. In the same note he refers to Bronkhorst's "translation of Skt. *duḥkha*," which of course does not appear in said text.

Beckwith offers to explain that "Pyrrho's point here is that humans want to know the ultimate, absolute Truth, but *the ultimate* or *the absolute* is a perfectionist metaphysical or ontological category created by humans and superimposed on everything" (34). But nothing in the Aristocles passage mentions anything about ultimate or absolute truth, God or gods, metaphysical or ontological categories or the superimposition of these by humans on "everything." Needless to say, there is no good reason to accept Beckwith's supposition that Pyrrho rejected "the antilogy of *the Truth* versus *the Lie*," and certainly no reason to believe that the Aristocles passage has anything to do with Persian religious texts.

Beckwith supports his interpretation by appealing to the way "several famous Normative Buddhist sutra narratives" show the Buddha's disdain for metaphysics and speculative philosophy (35). But what has this to do with Pyrrho? Beckwith has failed to show any connection between the Buddha and Pyrrho, but beyond this great stumbling block in his path let us recall that Pyrrhonians, as Sextus Empiricus describes them, ceaselessly inquire into these matters: to be a Pyrrhonian sceptic is to tirelessly toil away producing metaphysical arguments not only against but also for any and all dogmatic views, just so that one may deploy these arguments against any other dogmatic opponents.[45] Some have argued that this is what Pyrrho is doing in the Aristocles passage, offering a metaphysical argument asserting that *ta pragmata* are *anepikrita*, *astathmêta* and *adiaphora*.[46]

Regarding part (D) of the Aristocles passage, recall that it reads "therefore it is necessary not to trust them, but to be unopinionated (*adoxastous*), impartial (*aklineis*), and unwavering (*akradantous*), saying about each thing that it no more is than is not, or both is and is not, or neither is nor is not." Here "them" must refer to sensations and opinions, but it is not perfectly clear whether Pyrrho's argument or Timon's interpretation of it is being described. Nevertheless, the appearance of more terms gives Beckwith an opportunity to offer more translation glosses and interpretations based on his understanding of Pyrrho's and Buddha's doctrines. Beckwith glosses the three alpha-privative terms with three complete "should" sentences that serve as partially italicized section headers: "We Should Have *No Views*" (36), "We Should Be *Uninclined to Either Side*" (37), and "We Should Be *Unwavering*" (39). Atomizing the original sentence into three discrete statements allows Beckwith to find equivalent teachings scattered, one by one, across a variety of Buddhist texts (37-40). That is, since Beckwith cannot adduce a Buddhist equivalent to section (D) of the Aristocles passage, he endeavors to assemble something similar to what he thinks the passage means out of tidbits of Buddhism acquired here and there. The resulting smorgasbord of proof texts and glossing is again totally unconvincing, not least because it does not show but presupposes what Beckwith has signally failed to show, namely, that there is any connection whatever between the Aristocles and *Aṅguttara-Nikāya* passages.

---

[45] Diogenes Laertius IX.74, 78, 90; cf. Sextus Empiricus *PH* I.5-6, III.280-281. Note how Sextus defines scepticism as "an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all" (*PH* I.8, tr. Annas and Barnes 2000, 4).
[46] Decleva Caizzi 1981, 225-227; Long and Sedley 1987, 17-18; Bett 2000, 14-29.

Beckwith is more restrained in his treatment of the so-called "tetralemma" with which section (D) of the Aristocles passage ends. He admits that the logical form of the tetralemma is older than Pyrrho, since it is clearly present in both Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (40), and so he does not claim that Pyrrho here is translating the Buddha. But the question should be raised whether section (D) does in fact contain a tetralemma.

Two readings of the Greek text (περὶ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου λέγοντας ὅτι οὐ μᾶλλον ἔστιν ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν ἢ καὶ ἔστι καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἢ οὔτε ἔστιν οὔτε οὐκ ἔστιν) are possible. First reading: "saying about each thing that (1) it no more is than is not, or (2) both is and is not, or (3) neither is nor is not." Second reading: "saying about each thing that it no more (1) is than (2) is not, or (3) both is and is not, or (4) neither is nor is not." The issue is whether the second and third ἢ should be read as subordinate to ὅτι or οὐ μᾶλλον. As M. L. Chiesara points out in her translation and commentary on the Aristocles passage, there is no way to resolve this dispute on purely linguistic grounds (Chiesara 2001, 103-104). In favor of the first reading, however, is a passage preserved in Photius, and attributed to Aenesidemus, in which a three-part structure is given.[47] This is relevant to the Aristocles passage because the rest of that passage is structured by distinctions made in threes: three characteristics of *ta pragmata* (*adiaphora*, *astathmêta*, *anepikrita*), three states of mind that are appropriate in response (*adoxastous*, *aklineis*, *akradantous*), and three results from achieving such a state of mind (*apatheia*, *ataraxia*, *hêdonên*).[48] Further, the first reading connects Pyrrho's statement to the Democritean principle "no more" (*ou mallon*); soon we will argue that Pyrrho here may be borrowing a principle from Democritus, and we think that it makes more sense to read the Aristocles passage as containing a trilemma rather than a tetralemma.

But let us consider Beckwith's interpretation of what he calls "the tetralemma formula," which he gives as: "It no more is than it is not, or it both is and is not, or it neither is nor is not." "This formula," says Beckwith, "invalidates all dogmatic arguments" (42). Note that even in Beckwith's translation one sees not a tetralemma but (if anything) a trilemma. In any case, we cannot see how it "invalidates all dogmatic arguments." Pyrrho says that the formula is to be repeated with respect to each of *ta pragmata* ("things") such as "this no more is than is not, or both is and is not, or neither is nor is not" (where "this" can be replaced by any "thing" in question). It does not follow from this procedure that all dogmatic arguments are invalidated (assuming that "invalidated" means something like having shown that their premises do not necessitate their conclusions). Further arguments would be needed in order to show that all dogmatic arguments are invalid: as Sextus Empiricus claims, invalidating all dogmatic arguments requires inquiring into and arguing against each and every individual dogmatic claim as it arises. This is what it means to be a

---

[47] "<They say that> things are no more of this kind than of that, or that they are sometimes of this kind, sometimes not, or that for one person they are of this kind, for another person not of this kind, and for another person not even existent" (Aenesidemus *apud* Photius 170a1-3, tr. Chiesara 2001, 104).

[48] Recall that Beckwith conjectures *apatheian* for *aphasian* in the Aristocles passage (see above n17). Whichever reading is correct, the point remains that the text is structured in threes.

Pyrrhonian sceptic. Sextus does not imagine resorting to a single "formula" or magical incantation, whether a trilemma or a tetralemma, to do this. Instead he describes elaborate argumentative weaponry, including the modes (the general modes, the ten modes, the five modes of Agrippa, the two modes, the eight modes against causal reasoning, etc.) and the sceptical phrases (such as "no more," "everything is undetermined," "everything is inapprehensible," "opposed to every account there is an equal account"). [49] So we cannot agree with Beckwith's assumption either that there is a tetralemma at play here, or that the logical form of a theoretical argument presented as a tetralemma was considered sufficient (by Pyrrho or early Buddhists) to somehow immediately undermine all dogmatic arguments.

## 8. PYRRHO AND DEMOCRITUS

The purpose of the preceding section was to examine and finally reject Beckwith's claim that Pyrrho offered "virtually a translation" of the teachings of the Buddha (32), and equally to examine and reject his argument that early Pyrrhonism was a sect of Buddhism. But in this section we will consider a different angle on the problem that Beckwith is trying to solve, namely the source of Pyrrho's ideas. For it is quite possible that Pyrrho gained his ideas from a Greek predecessor such as Democritus of Abdera (b. 460-457 BCE). Accordingly, we will now address Beckwith's claim that Pyrrho's views were "unprecedented" and "unparalleled" in earlier Greek thought (28).

According to Numenius (2nd c. CE): "In a way, Pyrrho started from Democritus."[50] Diogenes Laertius states: "Philo of Athens, who got to know him well, said that Pyrrho most of all mentioned Democritus, and after him Homer."[51] This may refer to Democritus' metaphysics and epistemology, some aspects of which may have been congenial to Pyrrhonians, as Diogenes Laertius suggests: "according to them, Xenophanes, Zeno of Elea, and Democritus turn out to be sceptics" (IX.72). There is also a connection between Democritus and Pyrrho that is especially important in this context: Anaxarchus. The tradition identifies Anaxarchus as a Democritean, and since Pyrrho travelled with Anaxarchus the Democritean teacher was no doubt as direct and important an influence on Pyrrho as any foreign source. All of this is admittedly secondary *testimonia*, but it needs to be taken into account: altogether there is much stronger evidence for an influence of Democritus on Pyrrho than there is for any influence of Buddhists on Pyrrho. Indeed, the connection between Democritus and Pyrrho was so often assumed that Sextus Empiricus felt compelled to explain how Pyrrhonism and Democriteanism are not the same:

---

[49] For the sceptical modes, see Sextus Empiricus *PH* I.31-186; for the sceptical phrases, see I.187-209 (tr. Annas and Barnes 2000, 46ff.).

[50] Eusebius, *PE* XIV.6.4.7-8; cf. XIV.18.27, where the ultimate source happens to be Aristocles.

[51] Diogenes Laertius IX.67. Timon the disciple of Pyrrho also praises Democritus: "Such is the thoughtful and crafty Democritus, a shepherd of words who disputed by looking at both sides, among the foremost I've read" (*apud* Diogenes Laertius IX.40).

The philosophy of Democritus is also said to have something in common with Scepticism, since it is thought to make use of the same materials as we do. For from the fact that honey appears sweet to some and bitter to others, they say that Democritus deduces that it is neither sweet nor bitter, and for this reason utters the phrase 'No more', which is Sceptical.

But the Sceptics and the Democriteans use the phrase 'No more' in different senses. The latter assign it the sense that neither is the case, we the sense that we do not know whether some apparent thing is both or neither. (Sextus Empiricus, *PH* I.213, tr. Annas and Barnes 2000, 54-55)

What Sextus refers to as the phrase "no more" was known to have been a Democritean slogan. Aristotle and the Aristotelian commentators, the Epicurean Colotes, the Academic Plutarch, and Eusebius (who also preserved the Aristocles passage) all testify that the phrase was frequently applied by and hence classically associated with Democritus.[52]

Turning back to the Aristocles passage, recall that Pyrrho is said to have required "saying about each thing that it no more is than is not, or both is and is not, or neither is nor is not" (περὶ ἑνὸς ἑκάστου λέγοντας ὅτι οὐ μᾶλλον ἔστιν ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν ἢ καὶ ἔστι καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἢ οὔτε ἔστιν οὔτε οὐκ ἔστιν). The above passage of Sextus shows that Democritus already used all three of these expressions or recognizable forms of them. First, "honey appears sweet to some and bitter to others" is but a specific example of the general expression "both is and is not." Second, "it is neither sweet nor bitter" is a form of "neither is nor is not." Third, the phrase for which Democritus is most famous, "no more" (*ou mallon*), finds expression in "it no more is than is not." The "no more" expression is exactly what Sextus is concerned to show that Pyhrronists use differently than Democritus did, acknowledging that they took it from him ("the same materials") and transformed its use. This evidence shows that the later Pyrrhonist Sextus Empiricus attributes to Democritus the three (not four) expressions mentioned in the Aristocles passage (further supporting the interpretation of the argument in the Aristocles passage as a trilemma). Beyond these points, Aristotle also offers corroborative evidence, earlier than Sextus Empiricus, that Democritus used forms of the relevant expressions:

The truth about the appearances has been approached by some from the sensations. For they think that it is not appropriate that the truth be judged either by more or by fewer people, and the same thing seems to be sweet to some people but bitter to others, so that if all were sick or all were deranged, but only two or three were healthy or in their right mind, then these two or three would seem to be sick or deranged and not the others. And again, opposite things appear to many of the other animals and to us, and to each individual person the same things do not always seem to be the same according to his

---

[52] Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I.4, 985b8 and Asclepius *ad loc.* 33.9 (Leucippus 67A6 Diels; cf. Asclep., *Metaph.* I.4, 985b4, 33.9, where it is claimed that both Democritus and Plato (e.g., *Republic* 479a) used the expression); Theophrastus, *Phys. opin.* fragment 8 (Dox. 483 = Simplicius, *Physics* 1.2, 184b15, 28.4 = Leucippus 67A8 Diels); Plutarch, *adv. Col.* 1108F = Democritus 68B156 Diels; Eusebius, *PE* XIV.3.

sensation. So it is unclear which of these things are true and which are false. For the one is no more true than the others, rather they are similar. For this reason Democritus says either that nothing is true or that what is true is unclear to us. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV.5.1009b1-12 = Democritus, 68A112 Diels)

This *testimonium* not only shows Aristotle attributing to Democritus forms of two of the three expressions mentioned in the Aristocles passage, but also drawing extreme "sceptical" conclusions from them: "either that nothing is true or that what is true is unclear to us." When we turn our attention from epistemology to ethics we also find a strong case for a direct connection between Pyrrho and Democritus.[53] Most directly relevant is Pyrrho's *telos*, his goal or end. Beckwith takes this directly from section (E) of the Aristocles passage, more or less understood to mean: "for those disposed in this way, Timon says that first there will be passionlessness (*apatheian*), then undisturbedness (*ataraxian*),[54] and Aenesidemus says pleasure (*hêdonên*)." Let us compare this with Diogenes Laertius' account of the *telos* according to Democritus:

> The end is *euthumia*, which is not the same as pleasure, as some have falsely represented it to be, but rather a state in which the soul continues calmly and stably (*galênôs kai eustathôs*), not being disturbed (*mêdenos tarattomenê*) at all by any fear (*phobou*) or superstition (*deisidaimonias*) or any other passion (*pathous*). And Democritus calls this being well (*euestô*) and many other names. (Diogenes Laertius IX.45 = Democritus, 68A1 Diels)

Diogenes' *testimonium* provides evidence that Democritus had already used equivalent expressions for the *telos* attributed to Pyrrho: *mêdenos tarattomenê* is the verbal equivalent of *ataraxia*, and *mêdenos tarattomenê…pathous* is the equivalent of *apatheia*.[55] Diogenes' testimony is also corroborated by an anonymous Hellenistic doxographer's report:

> Democritus and Plato likewise place happiness (*eudaimonia*) in the soul. . . . Democritus also calls happiness tranquility (*euthumian*), being well (*euestô*), harmony (*harmonian*), balance (*summetrian*), and undisturbedness (*ataraxian*). (Stobeaus II.7.3i = 68A167 Diels)

Between the two reports, then, expressions (or the equivalent) attributed to Pyrrho in the Aristocles passage are earlier attested for Democritus. The terms used by Democritus break down into two groups, positive and negative. The positive ones are:

---

[53] See Bett 2000, 152-160 and Svavarsson 2013, 15-16. Bett and Svavarsson summarize the evidence and survey the linkages between Democritus and Pyrrhonism on epistemological and metaphysical as well as ethical issues, although they also discuss numerous discrepancies between their positions.

[54] In addition to conjecturing *apatheian* ("passionlessness") instead of *aphasian* ("speechlessness"), as noted above, Beckwith often glosses *ataraxia* as "undisturbedness" (Beckwith 2015, 16, et passim).

[55] Thus, if Beckwith is correct in his conjectures of *apatheia* for *aphasia* and that the Aristocles passage ultimately represents Pyrrho's ideas (not those of Timon or Aenesidemus), then the best explanation for the source of Pyrrho's ideas may be Democritus.

*eudaimonia* (lit. "having a good destiny"; happiness or prosperity) and *euthumia* (lit. "having good spirits"; tranquility or contentment); Democritus also refers to *euestô* (being well) and *eustathôs* (well-balanced or stable), two other terms formed with the prefix *eu-* (meaning "good" or "well").[56] The second of these is the antonym of the alpha-privative term *astathmêta* (unstable), which appears in the Aristocles passage as a predicate of the *ta pragmata* towards which we are supposed to develop an attitude of *ataraxia*. Most importantly, Democritus used the term *ataraxia* (undisturbedness) [57] in addition to *athaumastia* (not being amazed or given to admiration)[58] and *athambia* (imperturbability),[59] all terms formed with the alpha-privative prefix meaning "not."[60] Democritus, it is clear, had been in the habit of piling on alpha-privative or negative terms for the *telos* long before it became fashionable in the age of Pyrrho and subsequently in Greco-Roman philosophy.[61]

This is not the place to go into a detailed comparison of the views of Democritus and Pyrrho. But the evidence already presented is enough to show that Pyrrho was perceived in antiquity to have been influenced by Democritus. Beckwith acknowledges that Pyrrho's *telos* "sounds like the *telos* 'goal' of Democritus and numerous other Greek thinkers…." (218). He also knows that "Classicist scholars almost unanimously" agree that Pyrrho was influenced by other Greek thinkers (218). He dismisses their work because of their "contending that the similarity of Pyrrho's thought to Indian thought is coincidental or irrelevant" (218), but this conflates two issues. Classicists have demonstrated earlier Greek influences on Pyrrho (which later Pyrrhonists acknowledge), but Classicists have not so much contended that "Indian thought" is irrelevant as ignored the possibilities for comparison. Flintoff (1980) is an important exception, but his discussion is ignored by Beckwith. Indeed, Beckwith's is the first attempt, of which we are aware, to rigorously show that there was a direct historical influence between Pyrrho and early Buddhism, but we think the result is an illustrative failure for the reasons stated above. Beckwith also says:

> Not only Democritus, but Antisthenes, Socrates, Plato, and many other thinkers have been cited as inspirations for elements of Pyrrho's teachings. Perhaps they did inspire

---

[56] *eudaimonia*: Democritus, 68A167 Diels; 68B251; cf. 68B40; 68B167; *kakodaimonia* 68A167; 68B159. *euthumia*: 68A1; 68A166; 68A167; 68A169; 68B4; 68B191; 68B258; *euthumeô*: 68B3; 68B189; 68B286; *euthumos*: 68B174; 68B191; cp. *dusthumeô*: 68B286. *euestô*: DL IX.46 (in a title of a lost work); 68A1; 68A167; 68B4; 68B257. *eustathôs*: 68A1, 68B191. See also the related terms: *eusunetos* (well-trained, 68B119); *eutaktos* (well-ordered, 68B61); and *eutucheô* (enjoy good luck, 68B180); cf. *eutuchês* 68B286.

[57] *ataraxia*: Democritus 68A167 Diels; 68A168; cf. *tarachais* (disturbances, 68B297); *mêdenos tarattomenê* (not being disturbed, 68A1).

[58] *athaumastia*: Democritus 68A168 Diels; 68B191; cf. 68A99a.

[59] *athambia*: Democritus 68A169 Diels; 68B4; 68B215; cf. *athambos* (68B216).

[60] Related terms include: *alupia* (not being pained, Democritus 68A170 Diels); *anekplêktos* (not being apprehensive, 68A168); *aochlêsia* (not being troubled, 68A170); and *akataplêxia* (not being dismayed; used by Democritus' follower Nausiphanes, 68B4).

[61] Cf. Beckwith, who thinks Pyrrho's "three characteristics" are "oddly…all *negative*" (Beckwith 2015, 25).

him, but they cannot be shown to have taught a *system* even remotely like his, and that is, after all, the real problem. (224)

Now Beckwith never bothers to examine these views sufficiently, so there is no reason to accept his claim about earlier thinkers like Democritus. Beckwith mentions Democritus only twice (both occasions quoted above), and what he says does nothing to cast doubt on the possible influence of Democritus on Pyrrho.

Beckwith's neglect of Democritus is unfortunate for another reason. Democritus is one of the earliest Greek philosophers for whom we have evidence that he travelled to the near east and possibly India. According to Clement, Democritus himself remarked on this:

> Democritus is said to have translated the stele of Acicarus and ordered it along with his own compositions; this is indicated by his writing: 'Democritus says these things'. And about himself he somewhere writes, while exalting wide learning: 'I, among the people of my time, have travelled the greatest part of the earth, and investigated the greatest things, and saw the greatest climates and places, and heard the most sayings of men, and no one ever found an error in my geometrical proofs, not even those Egyptians who are called surveyors. Including the Egyptians, in total I spent eight years among foreigners'. For he went to Babylon and Persia and Egypt to be a pupil of the magi and priests. (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* I.15.69 = 68B299 Diels)

There is ample room for doubt about many aspects of this passage, but for our purposes what is important is that it suggests that Democritus himself acknowledged or claimed foreign influences on his philosophy. Several other testimonies also report on Democritus' travels, and they all indicate that these journeys were specifically for the purpose of learning foreign wisdom.[62] Now even though it may be doubted that Democritus travelled to India, it is more likely that he travelled in the near east, and that while there he sought to gather information on wisdom traditions. The point is

---

[62] "Demetrius <of Magnesia, ca. 1st century BC> in his work *On People with the Same Name*, and Antisthenes <of Rhodes, ca. 2nd century BC> in his *Successions* report that Democritus travelled into Egypt, to the priests in order to learn geometry, and into Persia, to the Chaldeans, and that he went to the Black Sea region. And some report that he associated with the naked sages (*gymnosophistais*) in India, and went into Ethiopia" (Diogenes Laertius IX.35 = 68A1 Diels); "Democritus son of Damasippus of Abdera met with many naked sages (*gymnosphistais*) in India and priests in Egypt and astronomers and magi in Babylon" (Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* I.13.1 = 68A40 Diels); "One account has it that Democritus of Abdera became wise in other ways but had a desire to live unknown, which he worked hard to put into effect. This is why he travelled to so many lands: so he went to the Chaldeans and into Babylon, and to the magi and the sages among the Indians (*tous magous kai tous sophistas tôn Indôn*)" (Aelian, *Miscellaneous History* IV.20 = 68A16 Diels); "<Democritus was> an Abderite from Thrace, a philosopher, and a pupil according to some of Anaxagoras and Leucippus, and according to others also of Magi and Chaldaeans among the Persians; for he went into <the lands of the> Persians and Indians and Egyptians and was educated about the wise things by each of them" (Suda, s.v. Democritus, Adler delta,447 = 68A2 Diels); "Megasthenes says that in the mountainous country <sc. of India> is the river Sila, on top of which nothing floats. Democritus, who travelled extensively in Asia, has cast doubt on this" (Strabo XV. p. 7031 = DK 68A12).

that we have equal or better testimonial evidence for Democritus' engagement with thinkers from Asia than we do for Pyrrho. And so it is possible that Pyrrho's ideas reflect ideas from Asia, but ideas learned by Democritus and transmitted through Anaxarchus to Pyrrho.[63]

Beckwith has not shown that early Buddhism was a decisive influence on Pyrrho, or that Democritus was not a decisive influence on Pyrrho. There are no doubt interesting comparisons that could be made between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism, but these have to be done the hard way: through careful philosophical analysis and comparison of the ideas, based of course on sound philology. Such comparison must also involve a consideration of the ideas of Democritus and his successors, including Anaxarchus. Unless this kind of influence is taken into account we are unlikely to get a clear picture of Pyrrho's philosophy.

## 9. CONCLUSION

As we stated at the outset, we admire Beckwith's wide range of learning and great ambition. But in the end we are not convinced that his study has produced any useful philosophical or historical results, and we think the cause of the failure is methodological. For the heart of Beckwith's effort is but a poorly executed comparison of two ancient texts accompanied by analyses based on unstable translation glosses, tendentious presentation of supporting evidence, and the whole marked by a weak grasp of some key primary sources and important secondary literature. This, in our opinion, is not a felicitous basis on which to compare philosophical ideas, much less to demonstrate lines of historical influence. And yet, despite our negative assessment, we find ourselves drawn to the world that Beckwith has tried to evoke, to the kinds of problems that he has tried to solve. We are thankful to him for that, and we hold out hope that such problems may yet be solved. Are there genuine similarities between ancient Greek scepticism and early Buddhism? If there are, can they best be explained on the basis of hypotheses about historical contacts? For us the only proper response to such questions, at least for the time being, is suspension of judgment.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

---

[63] We cannot here explore the possible connections between Democritus and Buddhism discussed by Hagens 2009.

REFERENCES

Annas, Julia and Jonathan Barnes (eds. and trans.) (2000), *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Attwood, Jayarava (2012), "Possible Iranian Origins for the Śākyas and Aspects of Buddhism", *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 3: 47-69.

Baums, Stefan (2009) "A Gāndhārī Commentary on Early Buddhist Verses: British Library Kharoṣṭhī Fragments 7, 9, 13 and 18", Dissertation, University of Washington.

Baums, Stefan and Andrew Glass (in progress) *A Dictionary of Gāndhārī*, <https://gandhari.org/n_dictionary.php>. Cited as of April 5, 2018.

Bausch, Lauren Michelle (2015), "Kosalan Philosophy in the *Kāṇva Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and the *Suttanipāta*", Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

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

Bett, Richard (2000), *Pyrrho, His Antecedents, and His Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

— (trans. and ed.) (2005), *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Logicians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.) (2012), *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Aṅguttara Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom).

Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.) (2005), *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya*. 3rd ed. (Boston: Wisdom).

Bronkhorst, Johannes (2000), *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India*. Reprint (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass).

— (2009), *Buddhist Teaching in India* (Boston: Wisdom).

Chiesara, Maria Lorenza (2001), *Aristocles of Messene: Testimonia and Fragments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Childers, Robert Caesar (1875), *A Dictionary of the Pali Language* (London: Trübner and Co.).

Chowdhury, R. P. (1955), "Interpretation of the 'Anatta' Doctrine of Buddhism: A New Approach", *Indian Historical Quarterly* 31: 52-67.

Clayman, Dee. L. (2009), *Timon of Phlius: Pyrrhonism into Poetry* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter).

Collins, Steven (1987), Review of *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India* by Johannes Bronkhorst, *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 2: 373-375.

— (1999), *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism*. Reprint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Cone, Margaret (2001), *A Dictionary of Pāli*, part 1: a-kh (Oxford: Pali Text Society).

— (2010), *A Dictionary of Pāli*, part 2: g-n. (Bristol: Pali Text Society).

Decleva Caizzi, Fernanda (1981), *Pirrone: Testimonianze* (Napoli: Bibliopolis).

Flintoff, Everard (1980), "Pyrrho and India", *Phronesis* 25.1: 88-108.

Frankfurter, O. (1883), *Handbook of Pāli: Being an Elementary Grammar, a Chrestomathy, and a Glossary* (London: Williams and Norgate).

Frenkian, A. M (1957), "Sextus Empiricus and Indian Logic", *Philosophical Quarterly* 30: 115-126.

Gethin, Rupert (1998), *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Gombrich, Richard (2006), *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge).

— (2007), *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*, 3rd Indian reprint (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal).

— (2013), *What the Buddha Thought*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Equinox).

Hagens, Graham (2009), "Syncretism and Ancient Chronology: Can Democritus Date the Buddha?", *Mouseion* III 9.1: 29-55.

Hicks, Robert D. (trans.) (1925), *Diogenes Laertius: Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Hiltebeitel, Alf (2011), *Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Hultzsch, E. (1925), *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum Vol. I: Inscriptions of Asoka*. New ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

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

Lindquist, Steven Edward (2005), "In Search of a Sage: Yājñavalkya and Ancient Indian Literary Memory." Dissertation, University of Texas, Austin.

Long, Anthony A. and David N. Sedley (eds. and trans.) (1987), *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

LSJ = Liddell, H. G., R. Scott, H. S. Jones et al. (1996), *Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed. with revised supplement (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

McEvilley, Thomas (2002), *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth Press).

Mitchell, Donald W. (2008), *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press).

Morris, Richard (ed.) (1885), *The Aṅguttara-Nikâya*, part 1. (London: Published for the Pali Text Society, by Henry Frowde, Oxford University Press Warehouse).

Norman, K. R. (2008), *A Philological Approach to Buddhism*, 2nd ed., reprint (Oxford: Pali Text Society).

Olivelle, Patrick (2012), "Aśoka's Inscriptions as Text and Ideology", in Patrick Olivelle, Janice Leoshko, and Himanshu Prabha Ray (eds.), *Reimagining Aśoka: Memory and History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 157-183.

Parpola, Asko (2002), "ΠΑΝΔΑΙΗ and Sītā: On the Historical Background of the Sanskrit Epics", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 122 (2): 361-373.

Polito, Roberto (2007), "Was Skepticism a Philosophy? Reception, Self-Definition, Internal Conflicts", *Classical Philology* 102 (4): 333-362.

— (ed.) (2014), *Aenesidemus of Cnossus: Testimonia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Rhys Davids, T. W. and J. Estlin Carpenter (eds.) (1982), *The Dīgha Nikāya*, vol. 2., reprint (London: Pali Text Society).

Rhys Davids, T. W. and William Stede (eds.) (2004), *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, reprint (Oxford: Pali Text Society).

Roebuck, Valerie J. (trans.) (2000) *The Upaniṣads*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India.

Shults, Brett (2016), "A Note on Śramaṇa in Vedic Texts", *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 10: 113-127.

Smith, Jonathan Z. (1994), *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Svavarsson, Svavar Hrafn (2013), "Tranquility: Democritus and Pyrrho", in Stéphane Marchand and Francesco Verde (eds.), *Épicurisme et Scepticisme* (Rome: Sapienza Università Editrice), 3-24.

Trenckner, V. (ed.) (1888), *The Majjima-Nikāya*, vol. 1. (London: Published for the Pali Text Society, by Henry Frowde, Oxford University Press Warehouse).

Wallis, Glenn (trans. and ed.) (2010), *Buddhavacana: A Pali Reader* (Onalaska: Pariyatti).

Werner, Karel (1988), Review of *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India* by Johannes Bronkhorst, *Buddhist Studies Review* 5 (1): 80-87.

Witzel, Michael (1987), "The Case of the Shattered Head", *Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik* 13/14 (Festschrift Wilhelm Rau): 363- 415.

— (1989), "Tracing the Vedic Dialects", in C. Caillat (ed.), *Dialectes dans les Littératures Indo-aryennes* (Paris: Collège de France, Institut de Civilisation Indienne), 97-265.

— (1997), "The Development of the Vedic Canon and Its Schools: The Social and Political Milieu (Materials on Vedic Śākhās, 8)", in Michael Witzel (ed.), *Inside the Texts Beyond the Texts: New Approaches to the Study of the Vedas* (Cambridge: Department of Sanskrit and Indian Studies, Harvard University), 257-345.

— (2005), "Vedas and Upaniṣads", in Gavin Flood (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism* (Malden: Blackwell), 68-101.

— (2009), "Moving Targets? Texts, Language, Archaeology and History in the Late Vedic and Early Buddhist Periods", *Indo-Iranian Journal* 52: 287-310.

Wynne, Alexander (2010), "The Buddha's 'Skill in Means' and the Genesis of the Five Aggregate Teaching", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 20 (2): 191-216.

— (2015) *Buddhism: An Introduction* (London: I. B. Tauris).