Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism

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and on the relevant and significant contributions to the topic of ethics and religion by Peter Winch and Norman Malcolm. This is a surprising omission, given the interest of the latter in Wittgenstein and his involvement with these topics.


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*Pyrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism,* by Adrian Kuzminski, is a short monograph of four chapters in which the author argues that Pyrrho of Elis (ca. 365–270 B.C.E.) developed his form of skepticism after coming into contact with Indian philosophers on his journey with Alexander the Great. Although the subtitle suggests that the primary focus of the study will be to develop this argument for historical diffusion, the book is more of an apology for Pyrrhonism, which Kuzminski thinks can be better understood by emphasizing its striking similarities with Buddhism. While presenting a plausible scenario for historical diffusion, he emphasizes parallels specifically with the Mādhyamaka school of Mahāyāna Buddhism in order to provide a better understanding of Pyrrhonism’s meaning, purpose, and potential. Kuzminski is persuasive in his use of Buddhism to clarify Pyrrhonism and to correct previous misinterpretations of Pyrrhonism by Western philosophers, but his treatment of historical and philological issues is often neither thorough nor totally persuasive. In what follows, I will present a summary of the book followed by some critical remarks. Kuzminski’s focus is on Pyrrhonism, but I will provide more discussion of his treatment of its similarities and contact with Buddhism.

In his first chapter, “Why Pyrrhonism is Not Scepticism,” Kuzminski argues that in contrast to the dogmatic and nihilist approach of the Academic skeptics who held that truth cannot be known, Pyrrhonism is best understood as a nondogmatic therapeutic philosophy that promoted suspension of judgment. This distinction is supported by the account of Pyrrhonism by Sextus Empiricus (fl. second century C.E.). In order to stress Pyrrhonism’s practical and soteriological goals, Kuzminski contrasts ancient accounts of Pyrrho, who is described as living a tranquil and recluse life, with those of Arcesilaus (fl. third century B.C.E.), the first head of the skeptical Academy, who is said to be somewhat pompous and prone to extravagant displays. Kuzminski blames the confusion between these two schools of thought on a number of prominent modern philosophers and contemporary scholars, including David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche, M. F. Burneynt, and Martha Nussbaum. Kuzminski considers Arne Naess the closest to a contemporary Pyrrhonist.

In chapter 2, “Pyrrhonism and Buddhism,” Kuzminski undertakes his most direct comparison of the two traditions. He emphasizes the plausibility of historical diffusion by pointing to both general evidence for sustained contact between Greece and India via trade routes and the Persian empire and possible references to Ionian Greeks in the middle-length discourses of the Buddha. Kuzminski rejects the claims
of Richard Bett, who argues on the basis of a later Greek fragment of Aristocles (fl. second century C.E.) that our sources for Pyrrhonism do not actually go back to the historical Pyrrho and that Pyrrho was more of a nihilist. According to Kuzminski, the account is biased and reflects the same misunderstanding many modern scholars have had. Kuzminski’s point of departure for his specific comparison of Pyrrhonism and Buddhism is Everard Flintoff’s 1980 article in which he argued that a persuasive case could be made for the necessary historical relationship between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism not on the basis of individual parallels but by considering the combination of similarities as a whole. Kuzminski, however, is critical of Flintoff on a couple of points such as his claim that the quadrilemma is unprecedented in Greece prior to Pyrrho.

When Kuzminski turns to his specific comparison of Pyrrhonism and Buddhism, he refers primarily to Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakārikā and Candrakīrti’s Madhyamakāvatāra. Both traditions share the idea that their philosophy is better understood as a method rather than a doctrine, and Kuzminski argues that the Pyrrhonist method of producing contradictory arguments in order to be led to a state of suspension of judgment (epochē) and then tranquility (ataraxia) is paralleled in the text of Candrakīrti. Both consider it necessary to accept involuntary sensory impressions and thoughts but to reject inferences that can be made about them. Citing Candrakīrti and Nāgārjuna, Kuzminski also relates the Buddhist concept of freedom from attachment to a particular view (dṛṣṭi) to the Pyrrhonist rejection of belief (dogma). Kuzminski also sees a similarity between Nāgārjuna’s and Candrakīrti’s description of emptiness (śūnyatā) and several passages in the Greek sources where one is urged not only to suspend judgment but also to suspend judgment about the suspension of judgment itself. Furthermore, Kuzminski argues that the Pyrrhonist concept of relativism is quite similar to the Buddhist concept of dependent origination (pratītyasamutpāda). Also noted are some well-known parallels in the way the two traditions illustrate inference, such as mistaking a rope for a snake and the idea that smoke indicates fire.

In addition to Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti, Kuzminski emphasizes that texts from the Pāli canon such as the Aṭṭhakavagga also insist on the necessity of freedom from belief. This chapter is brought to a close by considering David Burton’s critique of Nāgārjuna, which he claims displays the same misunderstanding in relation to Buddhism as other scholars have displayed in relation to Pyrrhonism by interpreting it as dogmatic nihilism.

In chapter 3, “The Evident and the Nonevident,” Kuzminski elaborates on the Pyrrhonist distinction between that which can be known from appearances and the judgments about these appearances that cannot be known. Buddhism is discussed secondarily, but several parallels are noted. The key issue is that Pyrrhonism differs from the traditional perspective of Western philosophy in that it does not assume that the physical world requires some intellectual organizing power in order to explain it. This implies that there is no mind-body split, and the same is true for Buddhism. Kuzminski equates the Pyrrhonist concept of appearances with Buddhist aggregates (skandhas), which also consist of both sensory experience and consciousness. Thus,
for both Buddhism and Pyrrhonism, the world of flux is the only true reality, and speculative claims about nonevident matters should be rejected. Kuzminski goes on to compare what the Pyrrhonists call the evidently nonevident with the Buddhist concept of emptiness and argues that the Pyrrhonist theory of signs stands in the same relation to their rejection of dogmatic belief that the Buddhist theory of namarupa (name-form) stands in relation to their rejection of attachment.

Chapter four, “Modern Pyrrhonism,” gives Kuzminski the opportunity to discuss both modern misconceptions of Pyrrhonism and the ways in which various philosophers have developed a modern form of Pyrrhonism. After criticizing some modern interpreters of Pyrrhonism and their ancient antecedents, Kuzminski praises a number of philosophers for their understanding of Pyrrhonism or at least their unconscious Pyrrhonist inclinations. Prominent among these is George Berkeley, who, like the Buddhists and the Pyrrhonists, attempted to sever the distinction between appearances and reality as it has been traditionally understood. The other philosopher on whom Kuzminski focuses is Ludwig Wittgenstein, who is praised for rejecting speculation on what the Pyrrhonists would call the nonevident. Kuzminski concludes with musings on the future of Pyrrhonism and the ways in which a rejection of belief could foster a healthier modern society.

Throughout this book, Kuzminski boldly challenges an intimidating array of scholars and philosophers in an attempt to show how Pyrrhonism has often been misunderstood. Considering the brevity of the work, Kuzminski is remarkably successful. He shows how a number of Western scholars have been unable to see the practical aspect of Pyrrhonism because of their limited exposure to strictly theoretical and dogmatic forms of philosophy. All in all, Kuzminski’s study is a welcome addition to the literature on this topic in that he shows the benefit of a comparative analysis with Buddhism for a more nuanced understanding of the issues.

The major drawback of this study is that it might have been more successful had Kuzminski further developed his comparative approach in a more thorough manner without making unnecessary historical claims that could not be adequately supported and developed in the space of this book. His characterization of Pyrrhonism rests almost exclusively on late Greek sources such as Diogenes Laertius and Sextus Empiricus and depends upon the acceptance of Pyrrho as the originator of Pyrrhonism and not just its nominal founder. The same goes for Kuzminski’s treatment of the question of historical diffusion. To a certain extent, Kuzminski exculpates himself from this charge by reminding his readers on several occasions that the scenario he is presenting is only a plausible one. His choice of the word ‘reinvented’ in his subtitle to describe the Greek adoption of Buddhist philosophy is deliberately intended to avoid the more ambitious claim of direct transmission (p. 5). However, this appears to be an attempt to justify the suggestion of a historical relationship while excusing the lack of more substantial textual evidence. Despite the relatively few focused treatments on this topic, Kuzminski is also not particularly thorough. He briefly mentions Thomas McEvilley’s work on this topic but neither addresses nor refutes his counter-thesis that the primary direction of diffusion was from Greece to
India. Kuzminski also leaves out the work of A. M. Frenkian and A. B. Piantelli, who have written on the question of historical diffusion. Unfortunately, these omissions are consistent with the rest of Kuzminski’s bibliography, which, in general, is rather light considering the scope of his research.

Notes


Reviewed by Ian M. Sullivan University of Hawai‘i

The last decade has seen the rapid rise of China as a global power, and the stability of China-U.S. relations has taken on global significance. The two political giants are meeting in the Middle East, Africa, and even Latin America. As Joseph Grange aptly points out, rising tensions over such issues as human rights and national sovereignty are not simply the result of differing political agendas. Underlying cultural assumptions and historical meanings are at the root of these differences, and opening a