

Notes on some ancient philosophers, from 2003

[Also see [these notes](#)]

A moment ago I discovered a website that contains complete translations of and commentaries on scores of ancient texts from every major civilization in Europe, Asia and Africa. Philosophers, historians and poets are represented. (I'm also looking at other scholarly websites that contain summaries.)

Anaximander, who lived at the time of Thales, was the first Greek to write a philosophical treatise, *On Nature*. In it he proclaimed that the Boundless (which is a type of matter, probably) is the origin and principle of all things. He adduced at least two arguments: (1) the Boundless itself has no origin, while everything else does; (2) in order for generation and decay to be perpetual, their source must be inexhaustible. The "eternal movement" of the Boundless somehow caused the birth of the world. Anaximander had three principle ideas on astronomy: (1) the celestial bodies make full circles in the sky. The stars, the moon and the sun all describe circular paths. (2) Earth floats unsupported in space. (It has a cylindrical shape, and we live on its flat top.) It doesn't fall because "that which is situated in the center [of the universe] and at equal distances from the extremes has no inclination whatsoever to move up rather than down or sideways; and since it is impossible to move in opposite directions at the same time, it necessarily stays where it is". (3) The celestial bodies lie 'behind' and 'in front of' one another; i.e., the universe is three-dimensional. The sky is not the two-dimensional vault that it is in Homer. Anaximander thought the stars were nearest to us, then the moon, and then the sun. He also made a map of the world. He considered life to have begun from the moisture that covered Earth before it was dried up by the sun. The first animals were a kind of fish, from which men developed. Oceans are what is left of the "moisture".

Anaximenes, who was probably a pupil of Anaximander, thought that air is the source of all things. When it's rarefied it becomes fire, and when it's condensed it becomes wind, then clouds, then water and then earth. He gave a couple of empirical examples to support his claim. He also associated air with the soul, and thus with life and intelligence: he seems to have thought it was capable of directing its own development, as the soul controls the body. Earth was formed from air and now floats on it; the heavenly bodies were formed from evaporations from Earth, and they too float on cushions of air. He interpreted natural phenomena in accordance with his basic principles: for example, hail is frozen (condensed) rainwater, and "earthquakes are caused by the cracking of the earth when it dries out after being moistened by rain". He may have been a material monist—'air is the only substance; everything else is composed of it'—rather than a believer that air simply changes into different matters, but we can't be certain.

Anaxagoras was born around 500 B.C. He wrote a treatise on nature. He thought

there's an infinite number of independent elements called "seeds", which are indivisible and imperishable, the ultimate components of combination, and which differ in shape, color and taste. Fire, earth, air and water are composed of them. Before the world was created, "all things were together, infinite both in quantity and smallness". This original mass was infinitely divisible, but no matter how much it was divided, every part of it would still contain a portion of all things. Thus everything has 'portions' of everything else in it. Seeds are distinguished from one another in that some have more of one thing and others more of another: for example, snow is both black and white, but it is more white than black. In other words, opposites are contained in everything (or rather, everything contains its opposite). The original mass became reality through the intervention of mind, which, as the source of motion, is a sort of 'fluid'. It's the thinnest of all elements, and it's the only thing that doesn't contain portions of other things. From its purity derives its 'mastery'. Inasmuch as mind enters into certain matters and not others, nature is divided into the categories 'animate' and 'inanimate'. Mind formed reality by introducing a rotary motion into the original matter; this motion ordered the world. Anaxagoras may be called the founder of theism, for he thought that mind (the source of motion and knowledge) is the only God.

Thales was born around 600 B.C. Aristotle considered him the founder of natural philosophy, since he was the first not to invoke mythology in his explanations. He founded the Milesian school, which included Anaximander and Anaximenes. (The first was a pupil of Thales; the second was a pupil of Anaximander.) His most famous philosophical idea is that water is the nature and originating principle of all things. Many facts support his belief: the sperm of all animals is moist; water can, more readily than other elements, be observed to evaporate and condense; islands in the Mediterranean were observed to be slowly increasing in size, by which it was inferred that water was changing into earth; "warmth [which is associated with life] is generated by moisture and lives by it", to quote Aristotle; metals can be heated into liquid; the ancients thought that spontaneous generation could take place in water; etc. Thales said that Earth floats on water, due to its wood-like buoyancy. In believing that Earth is less dense than water he may have had in mind examples of pumice-like "floating islands" which were seen and documented by ancient writers. Earthquakes he explained as results of the rough movements of oceans. He probably thought the earth is spherical, because this is the best explanation of many phenomena he would have observed as an astronomer. Apparently he predicted a solar eclipse in the year 585, though it isn't known how, and he theorized that such an eclipse is the result of the moon passing between the earth and the sun. He determined the dates of the solstices and discovered—or heard from the Egyptians—that the year is 365 days long. It's thought that he introduced geometry into Greece by visiting Egypt, which had invented it much earlier for the purpose of land measurement. He's also credited with five Euclidean theorems, which he 'proved' by repeated demonstration rather than logic.

Empedocles was an Eleatic, a follower of Parmenides. He accepted the doctrine that *what is* is uncreated and indestructible, but he avoided Parmenides' unacceptable conclusions by assuming the four elements of fire, water, air and earth. Love and Strife are what explain the attraction and repulsion of different types of matter. In the beginning all was one, "a God eternal and at rest", in which all the elements were held together by Love. Strife prevailed, though, and the elements separated themselves. Organic life arose through Strife. Eventually this world will succumb once more to Love and everything will be reduced to chaos, but then a new world will be formed, and so on forever. The elements are everlasting; their combinations are not. Fire, as the rarest and most powerful, is the chief element, "the soul of all sentient and intellectual beings which issue from the central fire, the soul of the world". The senses cannot apprehend the perfect unity of the four elements because Strife has separated them; Empedocles therefore trusted only the intellect. He distinguished between the world of the senses and its "type", the intellectual world. (Um, was Plato a plagiarizer?)

I'll pass over Pythagoras; I already know enough about him.

Zeno was an Eleatic. Through his paradoxes he tried to refute such fundamental facts about the world as motion, space and time. For example: "If there is such a thing as space, it will be in something, for all being is in something, and that which is in something is in some space. So this space will be in a space, and so on ad infinitum. Accordingly, there is no such thing as space."

Leucippus was the founder of Atomism. He agreed with Parmenides that if there's no such thing as a void there can be no motion and multiplicity, so he concluded that there must be a void. He didn't identify it with the nonexistent, as Parmenides did; he said it's a vacuum. Inside this empty space is an infinite number of indivisible atoms which are invisible because of their smallness. Their motion results in the combinations we perceive with our senses. They're different sizes, which accounts for the phenomenon of weight. He didn't think 'absolute' weight exists: weight isn't a primary property of bodies. It's only relative. (Epicurus was the first to ascribe weight to atoms.)

The first effect of the motion of the atoms is that the larger atoms are retarded, not because they are 'heavy', but because they are more exposed to impact than the smaller. In particular, atoms of an irregular shape become entangled with one another and form groups of atoms, which are still more exposed to impact and consequent retardation. The smallest and roundest atoms, on the other hand, preserve their original motions best, and these are the atoms of which fire is composed. In an infinite void in which an infinite number of atoms of countless shapes and sizes are constantly impinging upon one another in all directions, there will be an infinite number of places where a vortex motion is set up by their impact. When this happens, we have the beginning of a world. It is not correct to

ascribe this to chance, as later writers do. It follows necessarily from the presuppositions of the system. The solitary fragment of Leucippus we possess is to the effect that 'Naught happens for nothing, but all things from a ground (*logos*) and of necessity'.

I'll quote a paragraph on Democritus, who was a disciple of Leucippus:

Democritus expanded the atomic theory of Leucippus. He maintained the impossibility of dividing things *ad infinitum*. From the difficulty of assigning a beginning of time, he argued the eternity of existing nature, of void space, and of motion. He supposed the atoms, which are originally similar, to be impenetrable and to have a density proportionate to their volume. All motions are the result of active and passive affection. He drew a distinction between primary motion and its secondary effects, that is, impulse and reaction. This is the basis of the law of necessity, by which all things in nature are ruled. The worlds which we see--with all their properties of immensity, resemblance, and dissimilitude--result from the endless multiplicity of falling atoms. The human soul consists of globular atoms of fire, which impart movement to the body. Maintaining his atomic theory throughout, Democritus introduced the hypothesis of images or idols (*eidola*), a kind of emanation from external objects, which make an impression on our senses, and from the influence of which he deduced sensation (*aesthesis*) and thought (*noesis*). He distinguished between a rude, imperfect, and therefore false perception and a true one. In the same manner, consistent with this theory, he accounted for the popular notions of Deity; partly through our incapacity to understand fully the phenomena of which we are witnesses, and partly from the impressions communicated by certain beings (*eidola*) of enormous stature and resembling the human figure which inhabit the air. We know these from dreams and the causes of divination. He carried his theory into practical philosophy also, laying down that happiness consisted in an even temperament. From this he deduced his moral principles and prudential maxims. It was from Democritus that Epicurus borrowed the principal features of his philosophy.

Protagoras, a later figure, belonged to the Sophist school. He was interested in the correct uses and meanings of words--and is thought to have written the first grammar book--but he's more famous for his idea that "of all things the measure is man, of the things that are, that [or 'how'] they are, and of things that are not, that [or 'how'] they are not". Truth is relative to each person. Judgments about qualities are not objectively valid; what is true, or good, or beautiful, or just for one person is not for another. Therefore Protagoras taught that it's permissible to criticize and change laws, which have evolved and are not absolutely valid. He also was an agnostic.

Cynicism was a school of thought founded by Antisthenes in the second half of the 400s B.C. It was more a way of life than a philosophical system. “The key ethical doctrine of the Cynics, inspired by Socrates, is that living virtuously is both necessary and sufficient for attaining happiness. One must live virtuously in order to be happy, and living virtuously guarantees that one will be happy. Virtue can be taught.” If something is pursued other than for the sake of virtue it will lead to harm: it will ‘ensnare’ the person. Conventional values like wealth, pleasure, power and propriety are worthless; the good life is one lived simply and according to nature. Antisthenes supposedly said he’d rather go mad than experience pleasure. Diogenes of Sinope was another famous Cynic. These “philosophers” were usually beggars. They were also anti-intellectual: they held that knowledge and art have no value; only ethics is important. Cynicism influenced the history of philosophy by being incorporated into the more sophisticated system of Stoicism.

Zeno of Citium founded Stoicism around the time of Aristotle. The philosophy is divided into three areas: physics, logic, and ethics. Stoics were material monists. They thought that only things that act or are acted upon exist, and only bodies satisfy this criterion. Nothing incorporeal exists; even mind, reason, and God are material. (However, they allowed that there are other ways of being part of nature than by existing. Time doesn’t really ‘exist’, so it is incorporeal.) If immaterial substances existed there would be no way to explain the interaction of mind and matter, for it is impossible that something physical can act on something nonphysical.

God is both eternal reason and “an intelligent designing fire that structures matter in accordance with Its plan. This plan is enacted time and time again, beginning from a state in which all is fire, through the generation of the elements, to the creation of the world we are familiar with, and eventually back to fire in a cycle of endless recurrence. [Subsequent worlds are identical.]” Since God is omnipresent reason, the world has order and beauty and is universally governed by the law of cause and effect. Fire and air (the active elements) combine to form breath or pneuma, which is the “sustaining cause” of all bodies and which directs the development of animate bodies.

What is a sustaining cause? The Stoics think that the universe is a plenum. Like Aristotle, they reject the existence of empty space or void (except that the universe as a whole is surrounded by it). Thus, one might reasonably ask, ‘What marks any one object off from others surrounding it?’ or, ‘What keeps an object from constantly falling apart as it rubs elbows with other things in the crowd?’ The answer is: pneuma. Pneuma, by its nature, has a simultaneous movement inward and outward which constitutes its inherent ‘tensility.’ (Perhaps this was suggested by the expansion and contraction associated with heat and cold.) Pneuma passes through all (other) bodies; in its outward motion it gives them the qualities that they have, and in its inward motion makes them unified objects

(Nemesius, 47J). In this respect, *pneuma* plays something of the role of substantial form in Aristotle, for this too makes the thing of which it is the form both 'some this,' i.e. an individual, and 'what it is' (*Metaph.* VII, 17). Because *pneuma* acts, it must be a body and it appears that the Stoics stressed the fact that its blending with matter is 'through and through'.

In animals, *pneuma* is called 'soul', and in rational animals it's also called the 'commanding faculty' (reason). "Unlike the Platonic tripartite soul, all impulses or desires are direct functions of the rational, commanding faculty. ...[Sense-impressions] are affections of the commanding faculty. In mature rational animals, these impressions are thoughts, or representations with propositional content. Though a person may have no choice about whether he has a particular rational impression, there is another power of the commanding faculty which the Stoics call 'assent', and whether one assents to a rational impression [i.e., judges its content to be true] is a matter of volition." Because the impression and the assent are functions of the same faculty, it's possible to avoid falling into error if our reason is sufficiently disciplined. Moreover, there are no impulses to have or do something unless one assents to an impression, which means that all desires are (at least potentially; see below) *acts of reason*. In spite of their materialistic theory of the mind, some Stoics (like Chrysippus, a pupil of Zeno) held that after wise individuals die, their souls continue to exist until the final conflagration--perhaps because their *pneuma* has a sufficient "firmness" to subsist as a body on its own.

Stoicism's logic is similar to Aristotle's. However, by the term 'logic' Stoics understand also rhetoric, language, truth, grammar, perception and so on. Chrysippus's theory of the criterion of truth is that it's an impression (called a "cognitive impression") that produces an intense feeling of conviction that can be caused only by a *real* object. This cognition, though, isn't in and of itself knowledge; knowledge is cognition that is "secure, firm and unchangeable by reason....and worked into a systematic whole by other such cognitions". Mere opinion involves weak assent and changeable assent (assent to a false impression). Skeptics, such as Arcesilaus, denied the existence of cognitive impressions, saying that "no impression arising from something true is such that an impression arising from something false could not also be just like it". Their arguments are fairly compelling, and Sextus Empiricus, a later Roman Skeptic, proposed that a Stoic sage, who never errs, can therefore not assent to any impressions (because it's possible they'll deceive him). He must suspend judgment, like the skeptic.

A slightly less reliable internet article on Stoicism has its own version of Stoic logic:

All knowledge enters the mind through the senses. The mind is a blank slate, upon which sense-impressions are inscribed. It may have a certain activity of its

own, but this activity is confined exclusively to materials supplied by the physical organs of sense. [Chrysippus disagreed with Zeno's 'imprint' metaphor for sense-impressions. He thought that the latter are *alterations* of the commanding faculty.] This theory stands, of course, in sheer opposition to the idealism of Plato, for whom the mind alone was the source of knowledge, the senses being the sources of all illusion and error. The Stoics denied the metaphysical reality of concepts. Concepts are merely ideas in the mind, abstracted from particulars, and have no reality outside consciousness. Since all knowledge is [ultimately] a knowledge of sense-objects, truth is simply the correspondence of our impressions to things. How are we to know whether our ideas are correct copies of things? How do we distinguish between reality and imagination, dreams, or illusions? What is the criterion of truth? It cannot lie in concepts, since they are of our own making. [The foundation of knowledge is] sense-impressions, and therefore the criterion of truth must lie in sensation itself. It cannot be in thought, but must be in feeling. Real objects, said the Stoics, produce in us an intense feeling, or conviction, of their reality. The strength and vividness of the image distinguish these real perceptions from a dream or fancy. Hence the sole criterion of truth is this striking conviction, whereby the real forces itself upon our consciousness, and will not be denied. [Remind you of Descartes?]

For Stoics, the goal of life is happiness. Whatever is good must benefit its possessor under all circumstances. Things like health, pleasure and wealth can conceivably be bad for their possessor; hence they aren't good but are merely indifferent. Conversely, sickness, pain and poverty need not always be bad, so they too are indifferent. "The only things that are good are the characteristic excellences or virtues of human beings (or of human minds): prudence or wisdom, justice, courage and moderation, and other related qualities." However, Stoics distinguish between what is good and what has value: wealth and the like may not be good, but they have value for self-preservation (which is the original impulse of creatures) and are thus preferable--other things being equal--to their opposites. The Stoic injunction to live according to nature means that one should rationally select things that have value, which means that they should be selected "in accordance with the virtuous way of regarding them". When they come into conflict--for example, when one can choose either to be wealthy or to preserve someone else's health--the way that is most in line with nature's rational plan should be chosen. But it's important to note that the *possession* of these things doesn't bring happiness; rather, the virtuous selection of them does. The ordering of one's preferences makes one happy. When I perform an action that is valuable (or "according to nature") I perform a "proper function", i.e., something that nature intends me to do. All animals and plants have proper functions peculiar to

them. When I perform a proper function virtuously, I perform a *perfect* function or right action. Only the wise and entirely virtuous person has this kind of 'moral knowledge'; the rest of us are equally vicious and ignorant. (That follows from the idea that virtue is the only good and vice the only evil. Since there are no gradations in goodness or virtue, people are simply either *virtuous* or *vicious*.) The sage--who is incredibly rare--subordinates himself to the universe and recognizes that he is basically nothing, so to speak. Suicide, by the way, is permissible in some circumstances because life isn't a 'good'.

Stoics distinguish two primary passions: appetite and fear (which are related, respectively, to what is pleasurable and distressful). They are "excessive impulses which are disobedient to reason". They're also opinions, i.e., assent to false impressions--because the only time that something 'good' or 'bad' is really present is when something favors or threatens virtue. Everything else is indifferent and so shouldn't cause excessive desire or fear. The wise man feels only well-reasoned emotions like "joy, watchfulness and wishing"--so that kindness, for example, results from the knowledge that other people are 'valuable', 'appropriate to one's nature'. Later Stoics modified these severe doctrines of Chrysippus.

I'm confused about two things: how can 'irrational' emotions be expressions of a rational commanding faculty? Maybe this objection can be answered by recalling that emotions are *errors*, and having a rational faculty doesn't imply infallibility. However, emotions are also said to be "disobedient to reason", which seems contradictory in a rational faculty. Secondly, if Stoics believe that humans necessarily live in accordance with the laws of nature, which are rational, what does it mean to exhort people to live rationally? Their (inadequate) answer is that, although we will always act as the necessity of the world compels us, we can *assent* to our involuntary obedience and thus follow the law consciously and deliberately.

Epicurus was born seven years after Plato's death. He agreed with Democritus that indivisible atoms are the basic constituents of the world and that they exist in empty space--because (1) without empty space, movement wouldn't be possible and (2) if compound bodies were infinitely divisible they would dissolve away into nothing. He also agreed that the universe (which is unlimited in size) has always existed, because it's impossible for something to emerge out of nothing. *This* universe, however, is a temporary one; gradually it will dissolve and a new one will be formed, and so on. To answer the question of why atoms move at all, Epicurus postulated that they have an absolute weight that pulls them in a downward direction. His second departure from Democritus was in his idea that atoms do not only fall downward; they also occasionally swerve to the side and thereby collide with each other. (Otherwise they would never meet and compound bodies wouldn't exist.) This idea of random atomic motion also allows for human freedom, which was denied by Democritus.

Epicurus's third departure was his avoidance of Democritus's skeptical

conclusions, which resulted from his distrust of the senses and his belief that qualities are unreal, existing merely as perceptions and not in things themselves. (The conclusion in question is that senses cannot give us reliable knowledge.) Epicurus agreed that properties don't inhere in things, but he thought that objects do have inherent 'potentialities' for causing certain perceptions--potentialities based on their atomic structures. The tendency of his philosophy is to explain natural phenomena mechanistically rather than teleologically, so that, for example, lightning is the result not of gods but of atoms, and the apparent purposiveness of nature is due to a process of natural selection. Through arguments like these, as well as the argument that if the world were under the care of a loving god it wouldn't contain so much suffering, Epicurus finally relegates gods to the status of blissfully happy beings who are unaware of our existence.

The mind is located in the chest, and mental processes are atomic processes. (If they were incorporeal they couldn't act on the body.) A consequence of this union of mind and body is that death is annihilation. The atoms composing the mind disperse. Because death affects neither the *present* self nor the *dead* one--which doesn't exist--it shouldn't be feared. Epicurus explained perception in the same way that Democritus did. His anti-skeptical faith in the senses derived from his belief that only *judgments* can be in error, since sensation is a passive reception of data. All ideas are formed ultimately on the basis of sense-experience. (There are no innate ideas, as Plato thought.) Epicurean ethics are hedonistic: pleasure is intrinsically good and pain intrinsically bad. Like Benthamite ethics, they're based on a theory of psychological hedonism, viz. that pleasure is the only thing people pursue for its own sake. Hence virtues should be followed only for the sake of 'prudence'. Two types of pleasure are distinguished: 'moving' pleasure and 'static' pleasure, the process of satisfying desire and the cessation of desire. An example of the first is the activity of eating, of the second the subsequent state of satiety. The second is superior. Thus tranquility is the greatest pleasure. To attain it we must overcome our anxiety about the future, which is the greatest destroyer of happiness. We must also reduce our desires to an easily satisfied minimum, i.e., suppress vain, unlimited, unnatural desires like those for fame and wealth. Epicurus had a contractarian theory of justice: he defined it as an agreement "neither to harm nor be harmed". People enter into communities for the sake of protection and justice, and justice exists only in those communities. He praised friendship highly, as providing men with security and happiness. A wise man should even be willing to die for his friend.

There were two forms of ancient skepticism: Pyrrhonian skepticism, nominally founded by Pyrrho (who was born in 365 B.C.) but really founded by Aenesidemus, which flourished between the first century B.C. and the third century A.D., and Academic skepticism, which flourished between 273 and the first century B.C. I'll

discuss the Academic variant first. After Plato died, his followers in the Academy directed their efforts toward developing an orthodox Platonic metaphysics. The sixth head of the school was Arcesilaus; he turned it toward skepticism, largely by attacking the Stoic idea that sense-impressions are infallible. His argument may be summarized as follows:

For any sense-impression *S*, received by some observer *A*, of some existing object *O*, and which is a precise representation of *O*, we can imagine circumstances in which there is another sense-impression *S'*, which comes either (i) from something other than *O*, or (ii) from something non-existent, and which is such that *S'* is indistinguishable from *S* to *A*. The first possibility (i) is illustrated by cases of indistinguishable twins, eggs, statues or imprints in wax made by the same ring (*Lucullus* 84-87). The second possibility (ii) is illustrated by the illusions of dreams and madness (*Lucullus* 88-91). On the strength of these examples, Arcesilaus apparently concluded that we may, in principle, be deceived about any sense-impression, and consequently that the Stoic account of empirical knowledge fails. For the Stoics were thoroughgoing empiricists and believed that sense-impressions lie at the foundation of all of our knowledge. So if we could not be certain of ever having grasped any sense-impression, then we cannot be certain of any of the more complex impressions of the world, including what strikes us as valuable. Thus, along with the failure to establish the possibility of *katalepsis* [--which is a mental grasping of a sense-impression that guarantees the truth of what is grasped--] goes the failure to establish the possibility of Stoic wisdom.

Because of this lack of knowledge, and because Arcesilaus was able to argue convincingly for both sides of every position, he concluded that we should suspend judgment about everything. (Of course, this is itself a judgment and is thus self-refuting, which is why some commentators think that Arcesilaus was concerned only with refuting the possibility of *Stoic* knowledge, not of *all* knowledge.) In response to the Stoic objection that life can't be lived in a perpetual suspension of judgment, Arcesilaus said that a person can do what is merely *reasonable* rather than *certainly right*.

Carneades was an eminent skeptic who lived almost a hundred years later. He adopted the dialectical method of his predecessor, according to which he argued for both sides of a position. Attacked not only Stoicism but every Hellenistic philosophy that claimed to have certain knowledge or to have discovered a criterion of truth. He argued, first of all, that there can be no certain truth because reason, the senses and everything else sometimes mislead us, and, secondly, that impressions are not completely objective but rather reflect their own subjective nature as well as the nature of reality. According to Sextus Empiricus, his practical advice for living in a

philosophically defensible way is that we should trust most sense-impressions because they're *plausible*: not only do they feel convincing, but they've been repeatedly tested. They may be wrong, but practically that's irrelevant: what matters is that they "hold" for the most part. Thus, Carneades (probably) admitted that certain sense-impressions *may* be true. (Some commentators think that Carneades was so much of a dialectician that he didn't believe even these views; he merely proposed them for the sake of argument. On this interpretation he was a 'negative' skeptic, i.e., he held no positive views whatsoever and thus avoided the inconsistency that Arcesilaus fell victim to.)

Philo was head of the Academy in the first century B.C. He thought that some sense-impressions may be true but that we have no way of knowing which they are. He also believed that truth must exist if some things are held to resemble it, and he advised that people should *tentatively* accept philosophical positions that are well supported. Cicero was his student.

Aristocles reported the following about Pyrrho's beliefs:

[Pyrrho] himself has left nothing in writing, but his pupil Timon says that whoever wants to be happy must consider these three questions: first, how are things by nature? Secondly, what attitude should we adopt towards them? Thirdly, what will be the outcome for those who have this attitude? According to Timon, Pyrrho declared that [1] things are equally indifferent, unmeasurable and inarbitrable. For this reason [2] neither our sensations nor our opinions tell us truths or falsehoods. Therefore, for this reason we should not put our trust in them one bit, but we should be unopinionated, uncommitted and unwavering, saying concerning each individual thing that it no more is than is not, or it both is and is not, or it neither is nor is not. [3] The outcome for those who actually adopt this attitude, says Timon, will be first speechlessness, and then freedom from disturbance.

Thus, Pyrrho abandons philosophy. His position, incidentally, like Arcesilaus's, seems self-refuting. Why should we arbitrarily exempt *its* propositions from the otherwise universal law that propositions are neither true nor false? If things can't be "measured" (described), how is it possible to say they can't be measured? Even if the metaphysical interpretation of his thought is rejected--according to which things *really are* undefined--in favor of the claim that he's describing only appearances, he isn't saved from self-contradiction, for he's still making a definite statement about them when he says we can't make statements about them. Moreover, how can you live if you don't trust your senses? Timon suggested that the Pyrrhonian *does* guide himself by appearances and therefore doesn't completely mistrust them (nor sentences that describe them); he mistrusts metaphysical statements based on them. But that surely contradicts the fragment above.

Anyway, in the first century B.C., Aenesidemus, a philosopher in Plato's Academy, revived Pyrrhonism as a reaction against the Academy's dogmatism that confidently affirmed some beliefs and rejected others. His alternative was not to assert anything unconditionally, not even the claim that he asserts nothing unconditionally. "The Pyrrhonist will only assert that some property belongs to some object relative to some observer or relative to some set of circumstances. Thus, he will conditionally affirm some things but he will absolutely deny that any property belongs to anything in every possible circumstance." Aenesidemus refused to say that anything *by nature* has a particular quality. He advanced a set of ideas called the Ten Modes to elaborate his basic hypothesis. Briefly, they are as follows: 1. The world appears different to humans and to animals, and there's no reason to think that one is more 'accurate' than the other. 2. How it appears to some people is different from how it appears to others. (This targets the endless disagreements among dogmatists as to the nature of the world.) 3. At times, objects appear to the senses of an individual in incompatible ways. Perfume is pleasant to smell and disgusting to taste, so in itself it is neither pleasant nor unpleasant. 4. A person experiences the world differently according to his emotional and physical state. 5. Appearances vary according to the position of the object. An oar looks bent in water and a pigeon's neck changes color as the pigeon moves. Why should we privilege one appearance over another? 6. Nothing is ever experienced in its purity; it is always mixed together with other things. Hence we are unable to experience the nature of things. 7. Different effects are produced by altering the quantities of things. (A grain of sand is rough but a pile is smooth.) 8. Something appears to have a property only relative to certain features of the subject or the object. (This is a paradigm of all the modes.) 9. The frequency of encountering a thing determines how it appears to us. 10. The value of things differs from person to person. For some people homosexuality is good while for others it is bad. Things are not good in and of themselves; hence we should suspend judgment about them. The relativism of these attacks on Essentialism is probably epistemological rather than ontological: Aenesidemus meant that we can't know the essences of things, not that they don't have essences. Like Pyrrho, he thought that a suspension of judgment would result in tranquility. We must accept our limitations.

Sextus Empiricus lived in the second or third century A.D. He distinguished between three types of philosopher: "dogmatists, who believe they have discovered the truth; Academics (negative dogmatists), who believe the truth cannot be discovered; and skeptics, who continue to investigate, believing neither that anyone has so far discovered the truth nor that it is impossible to do so". However, he claimed that even if he discovered a philosophy that apparently had no faults he wouldn't believe it because it might be disproved in the future. So, practically speaking, for Sextus it seems impossible to discover truth.

According to Sextus, one does not start out as a skeptic, but rather stumbles on to it. Initially, one becomes troubled by the kinds of disagreements focused on in Aenesidemus' modes and seeks to determine which appearances accurately represent the world and which explanations accurately reveal the causal histories of events. The motivation for figuring things out, Sextus asserts, is to become tranquil, i.e. to remove the disturbance that results from confronting incompatible views of the world. As the proto-skeptic attempts to sort out the evidence and discover the privileged perspective or the correct theory, he finds that for each account that purports to establish something true about the world there is another, equally convincing account, that purports to establish an opposed and incompatible view of the same thing. Being faced with this equipollence, he is unable to assent to either of the opposed accounts and thereby suspends judgment. This, of course, is not what he set out to do. But by virtue of his intellectual integrity, he is simply not able to arrive at a conclusion and so he finds himself without any definite view. What he also finds is that the tranquility that he originally thought would come only by arriving at the truth, follows upon his suspended judgment as a shadow follows a body.

Arriving at definite views is one of the main sources of psychological disturbance. Sextus reported a second set of modes called the Five Modes of Agrippa (with which he may or may not have agreed):

Agrippa's Five Modes relies on the prevalence of dispute and repeats the main theme of Aenesidemus' Modes: we are frequently faced with dissenting opinions regarding the same matter and yet we have no adequate grounds on which to prefer one view over another. Should a dogmatist offer an account of such grounds, the skeptic may then request further justification, thereby setting off an infinite regress. And presumably, we should not be willing to accept an explanation that is never complete, i.e. one that requires further explaining itself. Should the dogmatist try to put a stop to the regress by means of a hypothesis, the skeptic will refuse to accept the claim without proof, perhaps citing alternative, incompatible hypotheses. And finally, the skeptic will refuse to allow the dogmatist to support his explanation by what he is supposed to be explaining, disallowing any circular reasoning. And of course the skeptic may also avail himself of the observation that what is being explained only appears as it does relative to some relevant conditions, and thus, contrary to the dogmatist's presumption, there is no one thing to be explained in the first place.

Sextus extended Aenesidemus' suspension of belief, which countenanced relativistic beliefs like 'in its nature X is no more F than not-F, though it is F in these

circumstances', to apply also to *those* beliefs. He didn't allow us to believe even that X is no more F than not-F. Thus, his form of skepticism is more a practice than a doctrine, since it rejects all doctrines. (That isn't strictly true, of course: unless a philosophy has *some* kind of a doctrine it isn't a philosophy. Sextus' doctrine, put crudely, is that all doctrines ought to be rejected. Thus, like other skeptics, he is inconsistent.) But the question arises of how the skeptic can live if he rejects beliefs. Sextus had an answer: "the skeptic will guide his actions by (1) nature [=perception and thought], (2) necessitation by feelings [=hunger, thirst, etc.], (3) laws and customs [which tell us how to evaluate things appropriately], and (4) kinds of expertise [=trades and professions, i.e. *skills* that don't rely on theories]"

To conclude, "a unifying feature of the varieties of ancient skepticism is that they are all concerned with promoting, in some manner of speaking, the benefits of recognizing our epistemic limitations. Thus, ancient skeptics nearly always have something to say about how one may live, and indeed live well, in the absence of knowledge." Secondly, ancient skepticism is more radical than modern skepticism: it isn't afraid to hold extreme views like the idea that every impression and opinion is false (which Xenias of Corinth believed). Thirdly, although it seems as if ancient skepticism is fatally inconsistent--in that, for example, it suspends judgment on all questions while making the judgment that there are equal arguments for and against every position¹--that's possibly wrong, because this kind of skepticism denies *realist* truth (that there are truths that correspond to an objective world)--the only form of truth that was recognized in that age--and doesn't take into account other kinds of truth invented in the modern age. Therefore, truths affirmed by skepticism are perhaps not realist but anti-realist ('coherentist', maybe, or pragmatic), and thus skepticism's arguments might not apply to them. I don't think this idea has much potential, though.

Origen, who was born in 185 A.D., was "the first systematic theologian and philosopher of the Christian Church" and composed the "seminal work of Christian Neoplatonism", his treatise *On First Principles*. In the beginning of this treatise he

¹ That may be a bad example. For if there is a good argument for every position we will be forced to suspend judgment, whether or not we articulate that necessity. It's peculiar, to say the least, to call an *expression* of an absolute necessity 'inconsistent' while the necessity itself (when not articulated) is not called into question. The necessity is granted by everyone--at least, it makes no sense *not* to grant it given the premise--but its verbal expression is attacked. What's disturbing about this is that I understand why the statement is criticized (it's a definite position and thus apparently contradicts the resolve not to have a definite position) and I also understand why it's perfectly in order and ought not to be criticized. Maybe the point is that the complete justifiability of their advice testifies *against* the skeptics that it's possible for doctrines and maxims to be *incapable of being wrong* (given certain premises, which in this case are not in question--and that's another inconsistency in the skeptic's position!).

introduces the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, which is reminiscent of his Platonic heritage. (Platonism made much of the “divine hierarchical triad”.) But rather than calling the three principles “monad”, “dyad” and “world-soul”, he calls them “Father”, “Christ” and “Holy Spirit”.

The first of these principles, the Father, is a perfect unity, complete unto Himself, and without body--a purely spiritual mind. Since God the Father is, for Origen, "personal and active," it follows that there existed with Him, always, an entity upon which to exercise His intellectual activity. This entity is Christ the Son, the Logos, or Wisdom (*Sophia*), of God, the first emanation of the Father. The third and last principle of the divine triad is the Holy Spirit, who "proceeds from the Son and is related to Him as the Son is related to the Father" (A. Tripolitis 1978, p. 94). Here is Origen explaining the status of the Holy Spirit:

The God and Father, who holds the universe together, is superior to every being that exists, for he imparts to each one from his own existence that which each one is; the Son, being less than the Father, is superior to rational creatures alone (for he is second to the Father); the Holy Spirit is still less, and dwells within the saints alone. So that in this way the power of the Father is greater than that of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and that of the Son is more than that of the Holy Spirit, and in turn the power of the Holy Spirit exceeds that of every other holy being.

This graded hierarchy reveals an allotment of power to the second and third members of the Trinity: the Father's power is universal, but the Son's corresponds only to rational creatures, while the Spirit's power corresponds strictly to the "saints" or those who have achieved salvation.

God's first creation was a collectivity of rational beings. (Although they had a beginning, they weren't created *in time*--whatever that means.) Their number was limited because an infinite creation would have been incomprehensible and unworthy of God. His intention was that they should “explore the divine mysteries in a state of endless contemplation”, but gradually they grew tired of this contemplation and ‘fell’ away from their creator. (That was when they acquired material bodies.) This fall wasn't the result of an inherent imperfection in them; it was the result of a misuse of “God's greatest gift”, their freedom. The only creature who escaped the fall and remained with God was Christ. His soul was no different from ours; he merely made a different choice than the rest of us.

Origen didn't believe that sinners will suffer in hell for eternity. Having been created in the image of God, they will eventually choose salvation over oblivion. Even

the devil will. This inevitability may seem to contradict free will, but Origen's conception of freedom was Platonic: it is the ability to choose the good. Because evil is merely the absence of good and thus has no real existence, "to 'choose' evil is not to make a conscious decision but to act in ignorance of the measure of all rational decision, i.e., the good". Some souls require a longer time than others to be educated on the good (because God allots different abilities to different individuals), but since God created them they're bound to learn someday. Multiple lifetimes are necessary for this education; hence Origen believed in the transmigration of souls. At the end of history everyone will be reunited with God, and things will be the way they were before the original fall.

Regarding freedom, the following is illuminating:

Origen recognized freedom only in reason, in rationality, which is precisely the ability to recognize and embrace the good, which is for him God. Irrationality is ignorance, the absence of a conception of the good. The ignorant person cannot be held responsible for his ignorance, except to the extent that he has been lazy, not applying himself to the cultivation of reason. The moral dimension of this conception of freedom is that ignorance is not to be punished, but remedied through education. Punishment, understood in the punitive sense, is of no avail and will even lead to deeper ignorance and sin, as the punished soul grows resentful, not understanding why he is being punished. Origen firmly believed that the knowledge of the good (God) is itself enough to remove all taint of sin and ignorance from souls. A 'freedom' to embrace evil (the absence of good) would have made no sense to Origen who, as a Platonist, identified evil with enslavement and goodness with freedom. The soul who has seen the good, he argued, will not fall into ignorance again, for the good is inspiring and worthy of eternal contemplation.

Origen was perhaps the first philosopher of history, for he understood it as a process that leads to a final culmination. (It isn't the orthodox Christian culmination of a divine judgment and revelation.) He didn't agree with Platonism that a knowledge of the good brings complete rest; he thought that souls will eternally engage actively with God, whose infinite nature ensures that his mysteries are inexhaustible to finite beings like us.

Not surprisingly, given his (seemingly) appealing doctrines, the Church condemned Origen in the fifth century, so most of his doctrines fell out of favor with theologians. But they were revived during the Renaissance and by some Christian Existentialists, for whom his emphasis on the unique nature of every individual was attractive.

--Anyway, you can see from these brief summaries that history, while never

repeating itself, does "rhyme" (to quote Mark Twain). Versions of innumerable ideas first suggested by ancient (and Indian) thinkers were revived in modern and early-modern Europe. Hegel is right, though, that some new content is always added to old thoughts when Spirit returns to them, at a "higher" (richer, etc.) level.