Book Reviews


The book under review is of interest to students of ancient philosophy not least for treating Timon of Phlius, the most important source for the philosophy of the obscure Pyrrho of Elis, primarily as part of the history of ancient poetry. For historians of philosophy Timon's primary importance lies in his exposition of Pyrrho's views, to which he may indeed have added his own thoughts. These views became the background to Aenesidemus's introduction of Pyrrhonism as radical skepticism in the first century B.C. Clayman argues that Timon is important in another way, namely as establishing a skeptical aesthetics that, along with Pyrrho's skepticism, profoundly and directly influenced “… some of the great Hellenistic poets like Callimachus, Theocritus and Apollonius of Rhodes who integrated elements of Timon's poetry into their own as well as his skeptical world view” (2). Indeed, the author views Apollonius's Argonautica as a “Skeptic epic” (187).

The book is divided into six chapters. The first discusses the lives of Pyrrho and Timon, for which our primary source is Diogenes Laertius. The author readily acknowledges that little can be asserted with confidence concerning these lives but offers an interpretation of the testimonies. Reasonably, she views Timon as an itinerant poet imbued with the philosophy of his teacher. Her account of the life of Pyrrho is longer and includes discussions of his philosophy, otherwise deferred to the second chapter.

In a subchapter on Pyrrho and the artists (27-31), the author offers an interesting interpretation of painting analogies in the skeptical tradition. She forges a link between the views of the Democritean philosopher Anaxarchus (who compared reality with scene-painting), apparently as an influence on Pyrrho, and the modes of Aenesidemus, “a collection of examples of conflicting sense impressions intended to induce suspension of judgment” (30). Although painting analogies may have played a role in early Pyrrhonism, it is misleading to confuse the Aenesideman modes to examples of sense impressions, as the tenth one shows, “depending on persuasions and customs and laws and beliefs in myths and dogmatic suppositions”, as Sextus says (PH 1.37). The author then traces particular examples of conflicting appearances in the modes back to Anaxarchus or Pyrrho. She mentions that of the butler of Alexander the Great, who shivered in the sun but felt warm in the shade: “Even though this is an apocryphal example, only someone close to Alexander would have thought to make it up” (30). In the same second mode Sextus mentions Indians, which example the author treats in the same manner, since both Anaxarchus and Pyrrho followed Alexander to India, although she concedes that the Indians “might well be a generic category of ‘others’” (30). Again, Sextus's story about Apelles, court painter to Alexander, in PH 1.28 “points in Pyrrho's direction” (28). She concludes by stating:
“Though his name is not directly associated with any of the examples, his own experience as a painter, amplified by Alexander's interest in artistic technique and the presence of Apelles and his crew for at least two periods during the expedition suggests that it was Pyrrho himself who put the issue in this way, and it follows from this that the epistemological concerns of later Skepticism began with Pyrrho” (30-31).

While the author is favorably disposed to accepting that Pyrrho's stance was inspired by Indian philosophers, “elaborately argued justifications for it were applied after the fact, first by Timon and later by others” (43). It is not clear to what justifications the author is referring. Timon's are not elaborately argued. But this statement would seem to entail at least that the philosophical justification offered in the so-called Aristocles passage, presumably from the Pytho, is Timon's work. It would also seem to follow that Timon's philosophical importance increases at the cost of Pyrrho's. It is to the Pytho and the Indalmoi (Images) that the author turns in the second chapter.

The author opts for a “metaphysical” reading of the Aristocles passage without argument, as she concedes (56), or much discussion. She follows the view that aphasia, which supposedly leads the Pyrrhonist to tranquility, is not non-assertion but speechlessness. Surprisingly, she refers to Sextus for support, but he understands aphasia as non-assertion (PH 1.192). Her discussion of the Indalmoi includes an original thesis about Timon's troublesome lines preserved in Sextus (M 11.20) ostensibly about someone's having a “straight canon” of, as is sometimes believed, truth. According to the author's interpretation, the canon in question is not quite philosophical, but rather “the description of how he writes, measuring meter and word carefully, and mining older texts for words and phrases which he will join seamlessly in a new creation, making it all seem real. This is the art of the Hellenistic poet, and it exactly describes what Timon does in his title and first verses” (66).

In the third chapter, the author turns to the three books of the Silloi (Lampoons) offering a quite detailed reconstruction (see especially 113-16), based on Diogenes's description (9.111). The first book includes Timon's description of his journey to the underworld, where he encounters various philosophers. The second book represents these encounters as a dialogue with Xenophanes, but culminates in a conversation between Pyrrho himself and either Timon or Xenophanes. The third book may have taken place in Athens, where Xenophanes asks Timon questions.

The author claims that “[t]he question and answer form of the dialogue reflects an essential element of Skeptic practice. Both the Pytho and the Indalmoi show Timon asking questions of Pyrrho, and Diogenes tells us that the Skeptics got their name from always making inquiries, but never finding anything (DL 9.70, also in SE PH 1.7) (85).” Perhaps exchanging questions and answers was characteristic of early Pyrrhonism, but Pyrrho does seem to have answered his disciple's questions. Timon's enquiries resulted in an insight into the nature of things, but did not continue without conclusion. In general, unlike later Pyrrhonists, Pyrrho himself seems to have been dogmatically final in his dismissal of the possibility of knowledge and the stability of its putative object. It struck this reader that the author played down this important difference between early and later Pyrrhonism.

The author also claims (85-87), and reasonably so, that Timon wittingly associates Xenophanes with Pyrrho. But she has the Presocratic admit that he was “not aware of every skepticism,” translating skeptosunê with ‘skepticism’, as has sometimes been done before. But one may wonder whether Timon would have used words derived from the verb