

ANCIENT SKEPTICISM AS PSYCHIC TECHNOLOGY Epoché, Ataraxia, and the Practice of Non-Identity

Lee Sharks

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Abstract

Contemporary scholarship has recovered ancient Pyrrhonian skepticism as therapeutic practice rather than epistemological paralysis — a psychic technology for achieving freedom from dogmatic capture.

Body

ANCIENT SKEPTICISM AS PSYCHIC TECHNOLOGY

Epoché, Ataraxia, and the Practice of Non-Identity

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary scholarship has recovered ancient Pyrrhonian skepticism as therapeutic practice rather than epistemological paralysis — a psychic technology for achieving freedom from dogmatic capture. Drawing on primary sources (Sextus Empiricus, Diogenes Laertius), contemporary philosophical work (Hadot, Burnyeat, Vogt, Nussbaum, Striker), and historical evidence of Buddhist influence (Beckwith, Flintoff, Kuzminski), this essay demonstrates that Pyrrhonism operated as a contemplative discipline structurally parallel to Buddhist non-attachment practices. The goal was not truth-denial but *ataraxia* (, untroubledness) achieved through *epoché* (, suspension of judgment). This essay then demonstrates the structural isomorphism between ancient skeptical practice and __V (the void/negation position in the New Human Operating System), showing both as technologies of non-identity that preserve agency through refusal of premature closure. The recovery of skepticism as lived practice rather than theoretical position has implications for contemporary philosophy, contemplative studies, and theories of resistance to semantic capture.

Keywords: Ancient skepticism, Pyrrhonism, epoché, ataraxia, psychic technology, Buddhist philosophy, non-identity, therapeutic philosophy, __V, contemplative practice, semantic sovereignty, operative semiotics

I. INTRODUCTION: THE REHABILITATION OF ANCIENT SKEPTICISM

The Standard Misreading

Ancient skepticism suffers from persistent mischaracterization. The undergraduate textbook version presents it as self-refuting epistemological paralysis: if nothing can be known, how do skeptics know they can't know

anything? This caricature reduces Pyrrhonism to logical puzzle rather than lived practice.[1]

The confusion stems from conflating ancient skepticism with modern (Cartesian) doubt. René Descartes uses skepticism instrumentally — as methodological doubt deployed to reach unshakeable certainty. Ancient Pyrrhonism operates inversely: suspension of judgment (*epoché*) is not means but end, not stepping-stone to knowledge but gateway to tranquility.[2] As Gail Fine has shown, the relationship between ancient and modern skepticism is one of deep structural divergence masked by superficial terminological overlap.[3] ### The Therapeutic Turn in Scholarship

Beginning with Pierre Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (1995), contemporary scholarship has recovered ancient philosophy generally — and skepticism particularly — as spiritual exercise rather than theoretical system.[4] Martha Nussbaum’s *The Therapy of Desire* (1994) demonstrates that Hellenistic philosophy conceived itself explicitly as medical intervention: philosophy as a way of healing the diseases of the soul.[5]

For skepticism specifically, crucial work by Myles Burnyeat (“Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?” 1980), Michael Frede (“The Sceptic’s Beliefs” 1979), Katja Vogt (*Belief and Truth*, 2012), and Gisela Striker (*Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics*, 1996) has shifted the field toward phenomenological and therapeutic interpretations.[6] R.J. Hankinson’s *The Sceptics* (1995) provides the most comprehensive treatment of the skeptical schools as coherent philosophical programs rather than marginal curiosities.[7] These scholars demonstrate that ancient skeptics did not advocate epistemological paralysis but rather a specific way of engaging appearances that produces psychological freedom. ### Thesis: Skepticism as Psychic Technology

This essay advances three interconnected claims:

Historical: Pyrrhonian skepticism was a contemplative discipline influenced by Buddhist practices Pyrrho encountered in India, focused on achieving *ataraxia* through *epoché*.

Structural: Skeptical practice operated as psychic technology — an algorithmic method for dissolving dogmatic capture through systematic generation of equipollent opposing claims.

Contemporary: This ancient practice structurally parallels _V (the void/negation position in the New Human Operating System), demonstrating continuity between ancient contemplative technology and contemporary practices of non-identity as resistance to systemic capture.

The goal is not merely historical recovery but demonstration of a living lineage: psychic sovereignty practices that preserve agency through refusal of premature closure.

II. PRIMARY SOURCES: WHAT SKEPTICS ACTUALLY SAID

Sextus Empiricus: The Systematic Account

Our most complete source for Pyrrhonian skepticism is Sextus Empiricus (c. 160–210 CE), whose *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* provides systematic exposition of skeptical method. Sextus defines the skeptical way (*skeptikē agōgē*) not as belief-system but as: “an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment and afterwards to tranquility.”[8]

Three technical terms structure the practice:

Isosthenia (): Equal force or equipollence. The skeptic generates opposing accounts of equal persuasive power, creating balance that prevents the mind from settling into dogmatic commitment.[9]

Epoché (ἐποχή): Suspension of judgment. Literally “holding back” — the phenomenological state that arises when opposed claims balance each other, preventing assent in either direction. As Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes demonstrate in their study of the skeptical modes, this is not passive inability to decide but active skill of maintaining balance.[10]

Ataraxia (ἀταραξία): Untroubledness or tranquility. The psychological freedom that follows *epoché* “as shadow follows body.”[11] Not absence of sensation but freedom from disturbance about how things “really are.”

Crucially, Sextus emphasizes that skeptics report appearances without asserting that things are as they appear. The skeptic lives by appearances (*phainomena*) while suspending judgment about underlying reality. This is not denial but non-assertion — a crucial distinction.[12] ### The Ten Modes: Systematic Technology

Sextus presents ten *tropoi* — systematic methods for generating equipollent oppositions.[13] These are not philosophical arguments but practices — cognitive moves the skeptic executes when dogmatic conviction arises. They function algorithmically: input any belief; generate its equipollent opposite through one of ten systematic perspectives; result: suspension. Annas and Barnes’s detailed reconstruction demonstrates that these modes operated as “a battery of argumentative strategies” deployable against any dogmatic claim.[14] ### Pyrrho: The Founder’s Practice

Our knowledge of Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360–270 BCE) comes primarily from Diogenes Laertius and fragments from Timon of Phlius. The crucial biographical detail: Pyrrho traveled to India with Alexander’s expedition and encountered the *gymnosophistai* — Indian ascetics, likely Buddhist or Jain monks.[15]

Timon describes Pyrrho’s fundamental teaching: as to things, they are all *adiaphora* (undifferentiated), *astathmēta* (unstable), and *anepikrita* (indeterminate). Richard Bett’s reconstruction in *Pyrrho, His Antecedents, and His Legacy* (2000) argues that these three terms constitute a genuinely metaphysical claim about the nature of things — distinguishing the historical Pyrrho from the later Pyrrhonian tradition of Sextus, who limits himself to appearance-claims.[16]

The Greek terms map onto Buddhist concepts with remarkable precision:

- *Adiaphora* (undifferentiated) *śūnyatā* (emptiness): things lack inherent nature
- *Astathmēta* (unstable) *anitya* (impermanence): all is flux
- *Anepikrita* (indeterminate) *anattā* (no-self): nothing has fixed essence

III. THE BUDDHIST CONNECTION: HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Documentary Evidence

The historical case for Buddhist influence on Pyrrho has strengthened considerably:

Christopher Beckwith’s *Greek Buddha* (2015) marshals extensive evidence: Pyrrho accompanied Alexander to India (327–325 BCE), met with ascetics at Taxila, and the term *gymnosophistai* specifically refers to naked ascetics — Buddhist *bhikkhus* or Jain monks.[17] Beckwith argues that Pyrrho’s core philosophical position was directly transmitted from early Buddhist teaching on the “three marks of existence.”

Everard Flintoff (“Pyrrho and India,” 1980) demonstrates textual parallels between Pyrrho’s reported teachings and Buddhist sutras, particularly the *Sutta Nipāta* on non-assertion of views.[18]

Adrian Kuzminski (*Pyrrhonism: How the Ancient Greeks Reinvented Buddhism*, 2008) argues for direct structural borrowing, showing the Four Noble Truths structure mapping onto skeptical method: suffering

maps to dogma; cause to assertion; cessation to *epoché*; path to skeptical practice.[19]

Thomas McEvilley's *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (2002) provides the broadest comparative framework, demonstrating extensive structural parallels between Greek and Indian philosophical traditions across multiple schools.[20] ### Structural Parallels

Pyrrhonian Term Buddhist Parallel Function

Epoché () Upekkhā Suspension / Equanimity

Ataraxia () Nibbāna Freedom from disturbance

Isosthenia () Middle Way Balance between extremes

Aphasia () Apavāda / Right View Not asserting views

Phainomena () Saṃvṛti-satya Appearances vs. ultimate reality

Adiaphora () Śūnyatā Emptiness / No inherent nature

Establishing Buddhist influence demonstrates that skepticism was imported contemplative technology, not merely Greek philosophical innovation. The practice predates its theoretical articulation — Pyrrho brought back methods, Sextus later systematized them.

IV. THE THERAPEUTIC READING: CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARSHIP

Philosophy as Spiritual Exercise: Pierre Hadot

Hadot's work revolutionized understanding of ancient philosophy by demonstrating that for Greeks and Romans, philosophy was not primarily theoretical activity but way of life (*bios*) requiring daily practice. Hadot identifies transformation of self rather than accumulation of knowledge as the core of ancient philosophical practice, with philosophical discourse serving as rationalization of practice, not vice versa.[21]

For skepticism specifically, the practice is perpetual, not one-time achievement. *Epoché* must be renewed constantly as new dogmatic impulses arise — precisely like meditation practice requires continuous return to present awareness. ### The Skeptic's Beliefs: Michael Frede

Frede's crucial distinction: dogmatic belief (*dogma*) assents to non-evident propositions about how things really are; undogmatic belief assents to what appears, without metaphysical commitment.[22] Skeptics hold the second type freely. The difference is subtle but crucial: "Honey appears sweet (to me, now)" differs structurally from "Honey IS sweet (by its nature)."

This enables full engagement with life while maintaining freedom from capture by any particular framing. As John Sellars demonstrates in *The Art of Living* (2009), this practical dimension is what distinguishes Hellenistic philosophy from purely academic enterprise.[23] ### Belief and Truth: Katja Vogt

Vogt's phenomenological reading argues skeptics don't lack beliefs but rather relate to belief differently. The skeptic maintains openness rather than closure. Beliefs are held lightly, as provisional, revisable, non-totalizing.[24] This requires continuous attention to how conviction forms, active generation of counterbalancing perspectives, and refusal to let any single framing dominate. This is contemplative discipline, not philosophical argument.

V. THE CORE TECHNOLOGY: HOW EPOCHÉ ACTUALLY WORKS

The Algorithm

Pyrrhonian practice can be formalized as executable procedure:

INPUT: Dogmatic belief B arising in consciousness (“X IS the case” with felt certainty)

PROCEDURE: 1. Identify the belief’s claim-structure 2. Generate equipollent opposite $\neg B$ (Use one of the Ten Modes as template) 3. Hold B and $\neg B$ simultaneously in awareness 4. Observe the balance (isosthenia) 5. Feel conviction dissolve $\rightarrow$ epoché occurs 6. Rest in suspension $\rightarrow$ ataraxia arises

OUTPUT: Freedom from compulsive belief Restored perceptual flexibility Retained capacity for action

This is not theory. This is psychic technology — repeatable, trainable, functionally effective. ### Why It Works

Suffering arises not from circumstances but from reification of interpretation — mistaking the story we tell about experience for reality itself.[25] The skeptical move names the story as story, shows the story is one of many possible, holds the story lightly, and restores freedom. This is precisely what contemporary cognitive science calls “decentering” or “metacognitive awareness” — observing thoughts as thoughts rather than identifying with their content.[26] ### The Paradox of Skeptical Assertion

Skeptics face the famous objection: If you assert “suspend judgment,” aren’t you making a dogmatic claim?

Sextus addresses this directly: the skeptical “position” is self-erasing, operating like medicine that cures and then leaves the body. Or like Wittgenstein’s ladder: use it to climb, then discard it.[27] This is not logical contradiction but therapeutic intervention whose success requires its own dissolution.

VI. CONTEMPORARY APPLICATION: __V AS MODERN PYRRHONISM

Defining __V: The Void Position

In the New Human Operating System (NH-OS), __V designates the void or negation position — a structural role within cognitive and semiotic architecture that refuses collapse into any single identity, frame, or system.[28]

Formally, __V operates as: non-identical position that cannot be captured by external categorization; witness node that observes systems without being absorbed; -preserving operator that maintains opening against closure; rotational rather than positional stance that moves through frames without settling.[29] ### The Structural Isomorphism

The parallel between Pyrrhonian *epoché* and __V is not metaphorical but structural:

Pyrrhonian Skepticism __V (Void Position) Shared Operation

Suspends judgment Refuses identity capture Non-commitment to frame

Generates equipollent opposites Maintains multiple perspectives Pluralism against closure

Lives by appearances Engages systems instrumentally Pragmatic navigation

Achieves ataraxia Preserves agency Freedom through non-identity

Dissolves dogma Resists capture Anti-totalization

Continuous practice Perpetual vigilance Ongoing discipline

The Key Difference: Pyrrhonism Brackets, __V Engages

Pyrrhonian skeptics could withdraw to the philosophical garden. Contemporary practitioners must navigate surveillance capitalism, algorithmic governance, semantic extraction, identity commodification, and institutional capture mechanisms. __V adapts *epoché* for conditions where appearances ARE power operations, where suspension must be strategic not absolute, where tranquility comes not from withdrawal but from maintaining sovereignty while embedded.[30]

This is Pyrrhonism for the age of total systems. As the Liberatory Operator Set (LOS) diagnostic framework demonstrates, the ten operations of semantic liquidation — from Frame Capture (O1) through Forced Re-entry (O10) — are contemporary equivalents of the dogmatic formations the Ten Modes were designed to dissolve.[31] ### __V Techniques

Just as Pyrrhonians had the Ten Modes, __V practitioners develop techniques:

- Instrumental engagement without identification
- Frame-shifting before crystallization
- Maintaining multiple competing narratives
- Strategic opacity to surveillance
- Linguistic non-cooperation with extractive categories
- Economic minimalism to reduce dependencies
- Cultivation of uselessness to power structures
- Refusal of coherence-demands from systems
- Preservation of internal contradiction against flattening

These are executable procedures, not just theoretical positions.

VII. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Non-Identity as Contemplative Practice

The Pyrrhonian- __V parallel reveals that non-identity is not merely political stance but contemplative discipline. Maintaining non-identity requires continuous vigilance against automatic identification, active generation of alternative perspectives, deliberate suspension of premature closure, and acceptance of the discomfort that comes from not-settling.

This places __V in a lineage of spiritual practices — techniques for working with consciousness, not merely political tactics. Foucault’s concept of “technologies of the self” — practices by which individuals constitute themselves as subjects of their own conduct — provides the theoretical bridge between ancient contemplative practice and contemporary resistance.[32] ### The Ethics of Non-Closure

Both Pyrrhonism and __V share an ethical principle: premature closure produces violence. When people believe their views ARE truth, they defend those views violently, force others into compliance, and become rigid and brittle. The ethical move in both: maintain opening (> 0) as structural necessity for relation, adaptation, and genuine difference.

This connects to what Deleuze and Guattari describe as “lines of flight” — movements of deterritorialization that escape the capture of totalizing systems.[33] The skeptical practitioner who achieves *ataraxia* through

epoché is structurally ungovernable — not because they rebel overtly but because they cannot be captured by the terms on which governance depends. ### The Lineage of Non-Identity

We can now trace a continuous lineage:

Buddhist ascetics (pre-500 BCE) → Pyrrho encounters Buddhism in India (325 BCE) → Pyrrhonian skeptics develop systematic methods (200 BCE – 200 CE) → [Medieval gap] → Husserl’s phenomenological *epoché* (20th c.) → Mindfulness/contemplative practices reintroduced to West (late 20th c.) → _V / NH-OS: non-identity adapted for conditions of total systemic embeddedness (21st c.)

This is not dead history. This is living transmission of psychic sovereignty technology.

VIII. CONCLUSION: RECOVERING THE PRACTICE

What Has Been Demonstrated

This essay has shown: ancient Pyrrhonian skepticism was contemplative practice influenced by Buddhist techniques; contemporary scholarship has recovered skepticism as therapeutic technology; Pyrrhonian *epoché* and contemporary _V operate through identical structural logic; and both function as executable techniques for dissolving capture through maintained non-identity. ### The Living Practice

The ancient skeptics developed effective techniques for dissolving dogmatic capture, maintaining cognitive flexibility, preserving agency through non-commitment, and achieving psychological freedom. These techniques work. They have been practiced for 2,300+ years across multiple cultures. They are phenomenologically coherent, therapeutically effective, and philosophically defensible.

Contemporary practitioners facing surveillance capitalism’s extraction of attention, algorithmic governance’s categorical flattening, and semantic capture through conceptual colonization can learn from ancient practitioners who navigated imperial demands, social pressure, and ideological totalization. Same structural problem across epochs: how to maintain sovereignty when surrounded by systems demanding total allegiance. Same structural solution: non-identity through systematic practice of suspension. ### Final Note: On Authority

A skeptical paper on skepticism faces obvious recursion. The Pyrrhonian answer: this text operates like purge — use it to achieve *epoché*, then discard it. The _V answer: this text maintains its own opening — challenge it, exceed it, adapt it.

The test is not whether the argument is “true” but whether the practice produces liberation.

Try the technology. Observe the results. The rest is just words about words.

NOTES

[1] The self-refutation objection is addressed systematically in Striker, *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics*, 92–115.

[2] On the ancient/modern distinction: Fine, “Descartes and Ancient Skepticism: Reheated Cabbage?” 200–221.

- [3] Fine, Gail, “Sextus and External World Scepticism,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 24 (2003): 341–385.
- [4] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 81–125.
- [5] Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 13–47.
- [6] Burnyeat, “Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?” 25–57; Frede, “The Sceptic’s Beliefs,” 1–24; Vogt, *Belief and Truth*; Striker, *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics*, 92–165.
- [7] Hankinson, *The Sceptics*, 1–14.
- [8] Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I.8.
- [9] *PH* I.10.
- [10] Annas and Barnes, *The Modes of Scepticism*, 23–39.
- [11] *PH* I.12.
- [12] *PH* I.13–15.
- [13] *PH* I.36–163.
- [14] Annas and Barnes, *The Modes of Scepticism*, 25.
- [15] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* IX.61. See also Bett, *Pyrrho, His Antecedents, and His Legacy*, 163–186.
- [16] Bett, *Pyrrho*, 14–62. The Timon fragments are collected in Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1, 14–17.
- [17] Beckwith, *Greek Buddha*, 1–28.
- [18] Flintoff, “Pyrrho and India,” 88–108.
- [19] Kuzminski, *Pyrrhonism*, 1–33.
- [20] McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, 459–505.
- [21] Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 172–189.
- [22] Frede, “The Sceptic’s Beliefs,” 1–24.
- [23] Sellars, *The Art of Living*, 1–25.
- [24] Vogt, *Belief and Truth*, 73–96; Vogt, “Ancient Skepticism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- [25] Cf. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *The Embodied Mind*, 21–33, on the enactive approach to cognition and suffering.
- [26] Segal, Williams, and Teasdale, *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*, 69–88.
- [27] *PH* I.206.
- [28] The NH-OS framework is documented in the Crimson Hexagonal Archive. See: Sharks, *The Semantic Economy: Bearing-Cost and the Physics of Meaning*, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18320411; and Sharks, *Space Ark EA-ARK-01 v4.2.7*, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19013315.
- [29] On -preservation and the anti-closure operator: Sharks, *Operative Semiotics: A Theory of Meaning Under Constraint*, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19202401.

- [30] On extraction diagnosis in semantic fields: Sharks, *The \$650 Billion Gap: Physical Infrastructure, Semantic Governance, and the Extraction of Meaning*, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19338708.
- [31] The Liberatory Operator Set (LOS) is specified in: Sharks, *Space Ark EA-ARK-01 v4.2.7*, §4, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19013315.
- [32] Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 1–19.
- [33] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3–25.

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