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Could the Cyrenaics Live an Ethical Life? Jules Vuillemin's Answer (and a Further Suggestion)

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Résumé : Cet article s'attache à comprendre si les cyrénaïques étaient susceptibles d'être attaqués moyennant l'objection d'inactivité et, si oui, comment ils auraient pu essayer d'y répondre et quel type de vision morale ils auraient pu essayer de défendre. En traitant de ces questions, j'évaluerai la légitimité de l'interprétation du scepticisme cyrénaïque offerte par Jules Vuillemin. Je confirmerai ainsi la plausibilité de son interprétation et développerai en même temps l'exploration de la nature et de la portée de la philosophie cyrénaïque.

Abstract: The paper aims to first understand whether the Cyrenaics were actually susceptible to the charge of apraxia; secondly, if they were, to see how they might have responded to this and what sort of ethical outlook they might have tried to defend. In dealing with these issues, I will inevitably assess the legitimacy of Vuillemin's interpretation of Cyrenaic scepticism. In so doing, I shall confirm the scholarly plausibility of his interpretation while, at the same time, providing material for further exploration of the full nature and scope of Cyrenaic philosophy.

Pyrrho led a life consistent with this doctrine, going out of his way for nothing, taking no precaution, but facing all risks as they came, whether carts, precipices, dogs or what not, and, generally, leaving nothing to the arbitrament of the senses; but he was kept out of harm's way by his friends who, as Antigonus of Carystus tells us, used to follow close after him. But Aenesidemus says that it was only his philosophy that was based upon suspension of judgement, and that he did not lack foresight in his everyday acts. He lived to be nearly ninety. [Diogenes Laertius, 9.62]

In the second part of his article on the morality of the sceptic, “Une morale est-elle compatible avec le scepticisme?”, the French philosopher Jules Vuillemin asks whether an ethical life is ever possible for the Cyrenaics [Vuillemin 1985, 25–35]. How will it be possible for the Cyrenaics and, for that matter, for any brand of sceptics to have an ethical life at all if scepticism lacks a criterion of truth, that is, a measure against which one has to choose what actions should be taken or avoided, asks Vuillemin.

As we all know, Vuillemin’s question is an ancient one for the sceptics of all sorts, one that has been put in quite different ways and has been answered in different ways too, both in ancient and in modern times.¹ The quotation from Diogenes Laertius on Pyrrho which appears as the epigraph to the present paper shows how the apraxia objection has been with scepticism since its very birth. Cicero formulates the apraxia challenge in a way I find particularly illuminating, at least for the purpose of the present paper. He does so by referring to the context of Stoic thinking on the subject, since the Stoics were the ancient philosophers who developed the apraxia argument against the sceptics at its fullest extent [Plutarch, *Against Colotes*, 1122a]. I report Cicero’s passage from the *Academica* in full:

We must first have an impression of what moves our impulse, and believe it, and that can’t happen if the object of our impression can’t be discriminated from something false. So how can the mind be moved to have an impulse if it doesn’t apprehend whether the object is suited to our nature or alien to it? Similarly, if no action strikes our mind as appropriate, it will never act at all, never be stirred to do anything, never be moved. But if we’re ever going to perform any action the impression we have must strike us as true. [Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, 2.25, Brittain’s translation]

In the passage Cicero employs the vocabulary of the Stoics and speaks of impression and assent; yet the philosophical point he addresses is related to Vuillemin’s: how could the sceptic act if he weren’t equipped with a valid criterion of truth that would ultimately allow him to discern truth from falsehood? The apraxia challenge grows almost naturally from the epistemological views of the sceptics—both Cicero and Vuillemin highlight the point. But Vuillemin argues that, like other sceptics, the Cyrenaics can meet the apraxia challenge and that, even on the basis of their subjective epistemology, they cannot only develop an original form of hedonistic theory, but also give it a practical application.²

1. On the different versions of the apraxia challenge, it is useful to see [Vogt 2010, 165–180, esp. 166], where she lists six different, yet not exhaustive, versions of the apraxia charge. For a magisterial treatment of the apraxia challenge, see [Burnyeat 2012], see also [Perin 2010, 86–113].

2. For a recent solution to the apraxia charge when levelled against the Cyrenaics, see [Lampe 2015, 56–91], where much emphasis is put on the limits of Cyrenaic

Now, what I propose to do in the subsequent sections of the present contribution is, first, to understand whether, like mainstream sceptics, the Cyrenaics too were actually susceptible to the apraxia charge; and second, if they were, to see how they might have responded to it and what sort of ethical outlook they might have tried to defend.³ In dealing with these issues, I will inevitably become involved in assessing the legitimacy and cogency of Vuillemin's interpretation of Cyrenaic scepticism; in so doing, I shall confirm the scholarly plausibility of his interpretation while, at the same time, providing material for further exploration of the full nature and scope of Cyrenaic philosophy. At the end, I shall suggest that the Cyrenaics were not only in a theoretical position to develop an ethics but also that their ethics is more wide-ranging and complex than usually believed (one that accords an important role in human life to happiness as well as pleasure).

1 The Cyrenaics on pleasure, knowledge and the apraxia charge

At first sight, it might seem misleading to ask whether the Cyrenaics were in a position to have an ethics. Diogenes Laertius places the Cyrenaic school as one of the ten main ethical schools of antiquity [DL, I, 18]. The key aspect of the philosophical outlook of the Cyrenaic school is that pleasure is the end of life; that is, the Cyrenaics held a quite substantial form of hedonism that, by making pleasure the kernel of moral life, seemed to have put them in contrast with ancient eudaimonism.⁴ The main source for the reconstruction of Cyrenaic hedonism is Diogenes Laertius's *Life of Aristippus* [DL, II, 65–104]:⁵

He [Aristippus] proclaimed as the end the smooth motion resulting in perception. [DL, II, 85]

They [the Cyrenaics] said there are two kinds of affection, pleasure and pain, the former a smooth, the latter a rough motion. [DL, II, 86]

“presentism” (I shall return to Lampe's interpretation in section 5 of the present paper).

3. A specification at this point may be useful for the reader: following Vuillemin, in the paper I constantly link the apraxia challenge with the actual possibility of ethics. What is being investigated is the possibility of *rational* action for the Cyrenaics; that is, of an action that, in being rational, provides the theoretical ground for a shared ethics. When I deal with the apraxia challenge for the Cyrenaics throughout the paper, the emphasis is thus put on the possibility of a shared, ethical framework for actions in the context of their thinking, and not on the possibility of action for the agent *tout court*.

4. On the topic, see [Irwin 1991], [O'Keefe 2002] and more recently [Lampe 2015]; I shall deal with the whole question in the final section of the paper, p. 42.

5. All translations are my own, otherwise stated.

Other sources such as Cicero, Aristocles of Messene, Sextus and Athenaeus confirm the extent to which the Cyrenaics were interested in hedonism, as well as providing further details about it. In particular, Sextus shows how the Cyrenaics linked pleasure with a kind of corresponding physiological modification or alteration in our body:

Cyrenaic doctrine differs from scepticism in so much as it says that the end is pleasure and the smooth motion of the flesh. [Sextus, *PH*, I, 215]

Lastly, Athenaeus gives us information on another important feature of Cyrenaic hedonism: the momentary, transitory aspect of pleasure. He says:

The Cyrenaic school began with Aristippus the Socratic; having approved of the affection of pleasure, he claimed that pleasure is the end of life, and that happiness is based on it. He added that pleasure occupies one temporal unit [is *monochronon*], since he believed, as profligates do, that neither the memory of past enjoyments nor the expectation of future ones were important for him. Judging the good in light of the present alone, he considered what he enjoyed in the past and will enjoy in the future not to be important for him, the former because it exists no more, the latter because it does not yet exist and is not manifest. [Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, 12.544a]

The Cyrenaics, thus, did propose a well-defined ethics. According to them, pleasure is the ethical goal of human life; as such, every human being should look for it. The Cyrenaics also conceived of pleasure as having a physiological source and as being a momentary event. One may then ask what sort of epistemology lies behind this ethics. In order to assess the legitimacy of the apraxia charge if levelled against them, we shall need to discuss whether the Cyrenaics endorsed a kind of epistemology that, being sceptical, cut them off from the theoretical possibility of having an ethics.

The theory of truth the Cyrenaics adopted is highly original; it may be conveniently termed as an epistemology of affections [*pathê*].⁶ Central to it is the idea that when we know something, we are affected in certain ways. For instance, if I see the wall in front of me as white, there is surely an affection of white produced by the wall in me. I cannot be mistaken about this, i.e., about seeing as white the wall that happens to be in front of me at this very moment. On the other hand, what the Cyrenaics were keen to remark on, is that, although we are surely not mistaken about how we are affected by things, we can never know how things in themselves really are. I see the wall in front of me as white; I cannot be mistaken about my seeing the wall as white; I will never know whether the wall is really and actually white in itself. Sextus

6. For a full introduction to the main content and details of Cyrenaic epistemology, see [Tsouna 1998], see also [Lampe 2015, chap. 3], and [Zilioli 2014, chap. 5].

Empiricus, the richest source on Cyrenaic epistemology, provides us with key-details, simultaneously introducing the neologisms the Cyrenaics invented to express their epistemological views:

The Cyrenaics hold that affections are the criteria [of truth] and that they alone are apprehended and are infallible. By contrast, none of the things that have caused the affections is apprehensible or infallible. They say that it is possible to state infallibly and truly and firmly and incorrigibly that we are being whitened or sweetened. It is not possible however to say that the thing productive of our affections is white or sweet, because one may be disposed whitely even by something that is not-white or may be sweetened by something that is not-sweet. [Sextus, *M*, VII, 191–192]

This is the reason why the Cyrenaics are thought of as sceptics: according to them, we know how things are for us, not how things are in themselves. Recently, I have disputed whether, on the basis of their epistemology, the Cyrenaics are best understood as traditional sceptics. I have suggested that the reason why they claimed that we know how things affect us, and not things in themselves is not because of our epistemological limitations but because of the nature of things. We can't know how things are in themselves not because we are epistemologically limited, but because things in themselves are ontologically indeterminate, that is, they do not possess any intrinsic ontological feature on their own.⁷ On my understanding, the Cyrenaics are to be seen as sceptics but sceptics of a particular kind, that is, of the same kind as Pyrrho, if we follow the metaphysical interpretation of Pyrrho and his thought offered by Richard Bett.⁸ For present purposes, however, the nature of Cyrenaic scepticism may be left aside: on both the traditional interpretation and the metaphysical one, I advocate, the criterion of truth for the Cyrenaics lies within the individual, that is, in the subject performing the cognitive activity. Accordingly, on neither interpretation is there an objective epistemological criterion that could ultimately work as the shared measure of truth.

This being the case, on both interpretations the Cyrenaics are susceptible of the apraxia charge: how will it be possible to have a criterion of rational action (and so, a shared ethics) if there is no common criterion of truth (namely a criterion that is shared as such by all the members of the community)? If you and I cannot even agree whether the honey we are eating at the

7. [Zilioli 2014, 75–100], [Zilioli 2015], to be read in contrast with [O'Keefe 2015].

8. Two alternative interpretations of Pyrrho's scepticism have been recently offered, one epistemological, the other metaphysical. For a sketch of the two rival interpretations, see section 2 of Corti's contribution to the present volume, p. 10–13; the metaphysical interpretation is championed by [Bett 1999]. It is worth noting, however, that, although he thinks my interpretation of the Cyrenaics as metaphysical indeterminists is in principle plausible, Bett does not agree with it [Bett 2015].

moment is really sweet, how could we ever agree to put it with the cheese and offer it to the guests coming later tonight? Since we don't have a shared criterion about the sweetness of the honey, we can't have a shared idea about how to act. Thus, the Cyrenaics can indeed be charged with apraxia, as much as any other sceptic.⁹

The point I have just raised with the example of the honey and our consequent inability to act under certain circumstances is illustrated with greater philosophical acumen and elegance by Aristocles of Messene, who offers a throughout and pervasive criticism of the doctrines of the Cyrenaics. First of all, he sums up the Cyrenaic view on affections in the following way:

Next would be those who say that affections alone are apprehensible. This view was adopted by some of the philosophers from Cyrene. As if oppressed by a kind of torpor, they maintained that they knew nothing at all, unless someone beside them struck and pricked them. They said that, when burnt or cut, they knew that they were affected by something. But whether the thing which is burning them is fire, or that which cut them is iron, they could not tell. [Aristocles *apud* Eusebius, PE, XIV, 19, 1]

Aristocles explains how the epistemology of the Cyrenaics ultimately forced them to be detached from the world: namely, that it prevented them from saying anything about the identity of the material objects causing the affections in them. The real threat of solipsism and inactivity seems here to hang menacingly over the Cyrenaics: how could a Cyrenaic decide to cut a cake if he weren't even able to establish whether it was a cake that was causing an affection of sweetness in him at that moment? Aristocles, once again, presses the point:

The man who has an affection certainly apprehends whether he is affected by an affection of something familiar or unfamiliar. How will he be able to say that this is pleasure and that pain? Or that he is affected, when he is tasting, or seeing or hearing? Or that he

9. It has been objected (by George Boys-Stones in personal conversation) that, after all, the Cyrenaics had a norm for action, namely the particular pleasure of the moment. Accordingly, they shouldn't have been bothered by the apraxia charge. My aim in the paper is to show why the Cyrenaics thought ethical action (issuing in pleasure) to be perfectly compatible with their philosophical outlook. As said earlier (note 3, p. 31), the emphasis in the present paper is, however, on shared criteria for rational action. For the Cyrenaics pleasure is undoubtedly the criterion for action. Yet, the (epistemological) way the single Cyrenaic comes to terms with pleasure cannot be private. Although he privately feels his pleasure and can be truly said to own it in a way that others don't, the Cyrenaic knows that he feels pleasure by means of a shared epistemological standard (for more details on this argument, see [Zilioli 2014, 131–147]). Were this the case, pleasure (even the particular pleasure of the moment) would provide for the Cyrenaics the ground for their ethics, namely a shared criterion for pleasurable actions (though individually felt as such).

is tasting with his tongue, seeing with his eyes and hearing with his ears? Or how do they know that we ought to choose this and avoid that? If they do not know any of these things they will not have impulses or desires and would not be living beings. They are ridiculous when they say that things happened to them but they do not know how and in which way. That way they could not say whether they were human beings or even alive. [Aristocles *apud* Eusebius, PE, XIV, 19, 5]

On the one hand, then, we have the Cyrenaics proposing a quite strong form of hedonism: strong enough for it to give ground recently to the claim that they are the first serious hedonists in the history of thought, or at least Western thought.¹⁰ On the other hand, serious concerns were raised even in antiquity as whether, theoretically speaking, the Cyrenaics could even propose, let alone defend, that hedonism or, for that matter, any ethical theory. Were the Cyrenaics aware of the possible conflict between their epistemology of affections and their ethical outlook? No extant source that I am aware of tells us whether they were actually concerned about the apraxia charge. I suggest, however, that they were not so lacking in philosophical acumen as to be unconscious of any potential clash between their epistemological doctrines on the one hand and their hedonism on the other. What I propose is that they held their hedonism to be quite consistent with their epistemology; in their own view, their theory left agents perfectly capable of acting ethically.

2 The *Theaetetus*: the subtler thinkers

To assess the legitimacy of my proposal we need to explore the philosophy of the Cyrenaics a little further. I propose to do this by looking briefly at the *Theaetetus*. I choose the *Theaetetus* for two main reasons, one slighter, and the other more profound. I single out the *Theaetetus* first because I follow Vuillemin's suggestion that the subtler thinkers named in that dialogue are best understood as Cyrenaic. A scrutiny of the evidence provided by this part of the *Theaetetus*—Vuillemin proposes—shows us the actual reasons why the Cyrenaics had no conceptual problems in defending a well-defined ethical outlook, despite the potentially threatening consequences of their subjective epistemology.¹¹ The second reason for considering the *Theaetetus* relevant

10. See [Lampe 2015, esp. 3–9, 26–91, 193–197], which offers much material to support Cicero's view that the Cyrenaics were the first hedonists in Greek thought: "When Epicurus said that pleasure is the highest good, on the one hand he did not fully understand that idea; on the other, that idea is not his own: before him and in a better way, that idea was of Aristippus" [*Fin.*, 1.8.26].

11. See [Vuillemin 1985, 26–27, esp. 27]: "Pour acquiescer à cette classification de nos impressions, il suffit d'être attentif aux données immédiates et aux apparences sans avoir à invoquer, avec le Socrate platonicien [*that is, the Socrates of the Theaetetus*], l'opinion ou la vérité".

to our current purposes is that the section of the subtler thinkers in that dialogue (namely [*Tht.*, 156a3–157c1]) provides us with a further challenge the Cyrenaics would have had to meet in squaring their epistemology with the possibility of action in everyday life.

In my view it takes little effort to accept Vuillemin's claim that there is a Cyrenaic substratum in Plato's *Theaetetus*. Vuillemin is, I think, quite right about this. In line with other scholars in the past, but in contrast with more recent interpreters, I have myself defended an identical view to Vuillemin's.¹² The matter remains controversial; my aim here is not to dig deeper into it but rather to explore a key section of the *Theaetetus* with an eye to the problem we have been facing in this paper, namely, the extent to which the Cyrenaics may have been charged with apraxia and the possible solution they may have provided to answer that charge.

As we all know, the *Theaetetus* is about the nature and content of knowledge. At a crucial point in the first part of the dialogue where, following Protagoras' lead, knowledge is defined as perception, Socrates refers to some subtler thinkers who, on his account, have developed at a fuller extent Protagoras' Secret Doctrine, earlier announced by Socrates himself.¹³ Central to that doctrine and to the views of the subtler thinkers is the crucial idea that everything is motion and is in motion. As Socrates puts it:

Their starting point [of the subtler thinkers], on which hangs everything we were talking about just now, was that everything was change and that there was nothing besides change;¹⁴ and of change there were two kinds, each unlimited in plurality but with

12. The main scholarly attempt to reject the identification between the subtler thinkers of the *Theaetetus* and the Cyrenaics is to be found in [Tsouna 1998, 124–137]. Tsouna's central argument for that rejection lies in the philosophical contrast she sees between Protagoras' relativism and Cyrenaic subjectivism. There are surely differences between the views endorsed by Protagoras and the Cyrenaics, but the affinities between them are highlighted both in antiquity and in modern times: see [Rowe 2015], which offers a quite sophisticated attempt to deal with the Cyrenaic presence in that dialogue. Mainly in contrast with [Tsouna 1998, 124–136], [Zilioli 2013] aims to show the reasons why the subtler thinkers are best understood as the early Cyrenaics.

13. "I'll tell you a theory that certainly ought not to be written off. It's to the effect that actually nothing is just one thing, itself by itself, and that you cannot refer to a thing correctly by any description whatever. If you call something big, it will appear as small as well, and if you call it heavy, it will appear as light too; and similarly with everything, just because—so the theory says—nothing is one, whether a one something or a one any sort of thing. If we say, of anything, that it is, we're wrong, because in fact all things are in process of coming to be through motion, and change in general, and mixture with each other; nothing ever is, it's always coming to be" [Plato, *Tht.*, 152d2–e1, Rowe's translation]. Protagoras' Secret Doctrine is the sort of metaphysical position Socrates (and Plato) sees as most compatible with Protagoras' epistemological relativism (as this has been stated at [*Tht.*, 152a ff.]).

14. A central tenet of Protagoras' Secret Doctrine (the other main fundamental tenet being that nothing is one thing, itself by itself). In the first lines of the quotation,

different powers, one to act, the other to be acted upon. From the coming together of these two kinds of motion, and the friction of one against the other, offspring come into being—unlimited numbers of them, but twins in every case, one twin being what is perceived, the other a perception, emerging simultaneously with what is perceived and being generated along with it. Well, for the perceptions we possess names such as seeing, hearing, smelling, cooling down or burning up, ones we call pleasures and pains, too, desires and fears, and others besides—an unlimited number that lack names as well as a huge range that are named. [Plato, *Tht.*, 156a4–b7, Rowe’s translation]

According to the subtler thinkers’ theory, there are two kinds of motion that, in coming together and rubbing one against another, produce a vast array of twin-births, namely what is perceived, on the one hand, and the perception itself on the other. In expounding the peculiar theory of perception endorsed by the subtler thinkers, Socrates is keen to use the term “perception”, which we have to understand in a sense broad enough to include what nowadays we label as “sensations”. Pleasure and pain, the two key-notions of Cyrenaic ethics, unmentioned so far in the *Theaetetus*, are now included in the list of perceptions Socrates offers while illustrating the subtler thinkers’ theory.¹⁵

The main philosophical features of that theory are actually identical with those of the Cyrenaic doctrine of affections, as we know it from those other sources (e.g., Sextus Empiricus) we have previously encountered (see above, p. 31–33). For the Cyrenaics as well as for the subtler thinkers, when I see a wall as white, there is a strictly private, epistemologically un-transferable, and momentary linkage between myself (more precisely, my mind) and the outer world. I cannot be mistaken about the wall that happens to be in front of me at the moment appearing to me as white. On the same basis, if I drink my tea after a wet walk, I will be able to feel pleasure and I cannot be mistaken about this—again, my feeling of pleasure being private, unfelt by others (who may feel pleasure while drinking the same tea, but not “my” own pleasure),¹⁶ and time-limited.

3 Vuillemin on the *Theaetetus*

Given the close conceptual affinities between the Cyrenaic doctrine of affections and the section on the subtler thinkers of Plato’s *Theaetetus*, Vuillemin argues not only that the subtler thinkers actually represent the philosophical views of Aristippus and the early Cyrenaics, but also that the theory the

Socrates sums up the core point of the Doctrine; in the rest, he will detail how the subtler thinkers understand—and further develop—Protagoras’ Doctrine.

15. See [Plato, *Tht.*, 156b4–6, Rowe’s translation], quoted above.

16. On the grammar of private sensations, see [Wittgenstein 1953, sec. 241–253].

subtler thinkers are made to elaborate in the *Theaetetus* contains the main answer the Cyrenaics may have offered to anyone challenging them with the apraxia charge. As I have said, the conceptual features of their subjectivist epistemology may well, at least in principle, make the Cyrenaics appear susceptible to the apraxia charge. How could the Cyrenaics have an ethics (of pleasure) and lead an ethical life at all if no objective criterion existed against which they could assess the validity of their affections, be these affections epistemological impressions or emotional responses? The solipsism potentially inherent in Cyrenaic epistemology apparently traps the life of the Cyrenaic in an insane inactivity.

Looking at the *Theaetetus*, Vuillemin argues that the theory of the subtler thinkers does after all provide us with a potentially objective criterion against which the Cyrenaics could measure their subjective affections: that is, *movement*, or more precisely the greater or lesser intensity of movement.¹⁷ We have seen that motion and change are central to the theory of the subtler thinkers, as is the idea that motion and change are at the roots of our perceptual activity, i.e., of the ways we come to terms with the outer world.¹⁸ Vuillemin's point is that a sort of classifications of our affections is possible for the Cyrenaics exactly on the basis of a certain and objective classification of the movements and alterations that give rise to those affections. Those movements and alterations, having a sort of biological basis, are able to provide us with a kind of extra-subjective criterion of assessment. There will thus be an effective and reliable way for the Cyrenaics to discern among affections. Such a possibility, in turn, will provide the Cyrenaics with an ethics, that is, with a sort of guide for action that is valid beyond our mere subjective states and is valid for all of us, since we all would be able to assess our own affections (of pleasure and pain) on the biological basis of the movements and alterations occurring in us while being affected, and we would thus be able to act accordingly.

If they could thus transcend the mere limits of their individual experiences, that is, through the presence of an extra-affective criterion for actions to be performed or avoided (on the basis of a scale of pleasures and pains), the Cyrenaics would indeed be able to reflect on their own primary affections, thus showing their epistemology capable of accommodating second-order types of judgement. That there is room for epistemological activities that go beyond

17. See [Vuillemin 1985, 27–28]: “Mais si l'on se souvient de l'hypothèse minima faite sur l'existence de préférences d'ailleurs privées de toute relation à des fondements ou à des causes extérieures, si l'on précise que cette hypothèse avait pour conséquence d'assimiler toute qualité sensible au double mouvement relatif du sentant et du senti, on ne manquera pas d'opposer au principe de la classification des impressions une classification des mouvements, étant entendu que ces mouvements sont de purs phénomènes, qu'ils ne consistent que dans l'identification de la qualité sensible et de la sensation, de l'agréable et du plaisir, du désagréable et de la douleur, sans prétention aucune à représenter quelque nature ou quelque être objectif”.

18. As seen earlier (p. 31), the early Cyrenaics and Aristippus himself linked the idea of affection with movement and alteration, [DL, II, 85–86].

the mere affective, perceptual apprehension is something Vuillemin stresses in his analysis of the apraxia challenge for the Cyrenaics, and rightly so;¹⁹ it is an important point, and one that has usually been obscured in the classic treatments of the Cyrenaics, though it has gained some traction in more recent interpretations.²⁰

I therefore believe that Vuillemin provides us—via the *Theaetetus*—with a credible way of explaining why the Cyrenaics might have had no actual problem with the apraxia charge, and might have gone to adopt a hedonistic ethics: their epistemology was such as to allow them to have an ethics, and one where pleasure plays a central role.²¹ Yet, I also think that the decision to look at the *Theaetetus* to find possible answers to the apraxia charge as levelled against the Cyrenaics takes the risks of that charge to a further level of danger and complexity for them: a level that Vuillemin’s analysis does not venture to explore, mostly because the Cyrenaics were just one part of his overall analysis of how ancient sceptics may have responded to the apraxia charge.

Two options now lie ahead for the reader: either to stop here and accept Vuillemin’s quite reasonable account of why the Cyrenaics were not bothered by the apraxia charge; or to read on as I try to explain the deepest challenge that, on my view, the subtler thinkers’ doctrine provides for the Cyrenaic theory of action, and investigate the possible response that the Cyrenaics could have offered to that challenge.

4 The *Theaetetus*: a further challenge

After outlining the first details of the theory of the subtler thinkers (the passage quoted earlier [*Tht.*, 156a4–b7]) to *Theaetetus*, Socrates proposes to explore the full content and the important philosophical implications of that theory. He does so by sketching a quite detailed picture of how perception works according to the subtler thinkers and indicates where such a theory will lead them:²²

19. [Vuillemin 1985, 28], where he stresses that the subtler thinkers of the *Theaetetus* are able to judge on the greater or lesser intensity of pleasures and pains.

20. See [Lampe 2015, 35–45] and [Zilioli 2014, 122–129]. More particularly, I think it is impossible to make sense of what Sextus says about the Cyrenaics on language [*M*, VII, 196–198], if we refuse to allow that the Cyrenaics admitted second-order types of judgments into their epistemology of affections (see [Zilioli 2014, 122–129], with further reference to the Cyrenaic doctrine of “internal touch”).

21. Lampe, Tsouna and Zilioli have all insisted on the close conceptual linkage between Cyrenaic ethics and epistemology (a linkage that has already surfaced in this contribution), although with quite different emphases and philosophical motivations [Lampe 2015], [Tsouna 1998] and [Zilioli 2014].

22. The passage I am about to quote is quite lengthy but I provide it almost in full, given its philosophical significance for our own purposes here. I also think that the

Nothing is, itself by itself, as we were saying before; rather, it is in coming together with each other that all things and all sorts of things come to be, from their changing. In fact it's not possible, they say, to get a stable fix, in the one case, even on which of them is doing the acting and which is being acted upon, for neither is there anything acting before it comes together with what is acting [...]. The consequence of all this, according to the theory is that nothing—as we were saying at the beginning—is just one thing, itself by itself, but instead is always coming to be in relation to something [...]. Our utterances should conform to nature and have things “coming to be”, “being made”, “passing away” and “altering”, since if anyone ever uses language that brings something to a stop, he lays himself open to challenge. The rule applies to talk both about the individual case and about many grouped together—the sort of grouping for which people posit “man” and “stone”, and so on for each animal and each kind of thing. [*Tht.*, 157a1–c1, Rowe’s translation]

What is, then, the final outcome of the subtler thinkers’ theory? It is that we cannot actually name material items such as objects and persons because these are not, actually speaking, what we usually take them to be. They are best understood as bundles that keep changing all the time, with no determinate or uniquely established essence. In fact, according to the subtler thinkers’ theory, nothing is one thing over time, everything being in a perennial process of change.

Let us focus on persons: Socrates sick is different from healthy Socrates, so there is not one real Socrates, but a series of different Socrateses who have, ontologically speaking, little in common.²³ And this is the dangerous point Plato has in mind, when he makes Socrates draw out the full implications of the subtler thinkers’ theory: the world as depicted by the subtler thinkers is just a vast array of processes, fully deprived of ontologically stable items, such as persons and objects as we usually conceive of them. But if this is so, what kind of persons will there be in such a world? It really seems that persons in that world are so evanescent as to evaporate altogether. But if there are no actual people, at least in the usual way we know and talk of people, in the world of the subtler thinkers (that is, in the Cyrenaic world if we believe, as I believe along with Vuillemin, that the subtler thinkers are actually putting forward Cyrenaic views), how on Earth could an ethics be developed and an ethical life lived in such a world?

Vuillemin recognizes the threat of inactivity in the epistemology of affections endorsed by the Cyrenaics and finds a response to that threat in

passage hasn’t received yet the full attention it requires. Obviously enough, it is by commenting on this passage that I bring in the notion of metaphysical indeterminacy, see [Zilioli 2014, chap. 4].

23. For the example of the two Socrateses, see [Plato, *Tht.*, 159b–c].

the theory of the subtler thinkers, as elaborated in the *Theaetetus*. On my understanding, that theory builds up that sort of epistemology but in the process it lays itself open to that threat again at the deeper level of metaphysics, that is, at the level of the material outlook on the world that lies behind that epistemology. The apraxia charge is thus in principle levelled against the Cyrenaics not only because their epistemology prevent them—at least on some interpretations—from picking out a distinctive, objective and shared criterion of action, but also because the metaphysics somehow implicit in that epistemology appears to dispense not only with material objects but also with agents, at least with agents displaying an identity over time. And if there are no actual subjects in the world, there will be no action, or at any rate only a fragmentary one, that is, a kind of evanescent action that could not possibly be the concern of any ethics.

One may retort that the deeper threat for the Cyrenaics as posed by the metaphysical commitments implicit in the theory of the subtler thinkers will be there if the subtler thinkers do in fact represent Cyrenaic views, and this is disputable, as we have seen: so, then, we shall be in a securer position if we simply leave these further commitments out. Yet, although there is no scholarly consensus on the actual identity of the subtler thinkers of Plato's *Theaetetus*, I think, together with Vuillemin and others, that there are quite good reasons for taking the views the subtler thinkers advance in the *Theaetetus* to be Cyrenaic. And, in any case, even if we judge that there are no compelling reasons for supposing that the subtler thinkers represent the Cyrenaics of the first-generation, the Cyrenaics will still be faced with similar objections from other sources.

Other sources than Plato's *Theaetetus* do in fact raise the same problem for the Cyrenaics. Aristocles already hints at it in the passage quoted above, when he says that, on the basis of the epistemology they endorse, the Cyrenaics will not be able to discern between pleasure and pain, and will not have any real desires: in short, they “could not say whether they were human beings or even alive”. Aristocles presses the point further, when he remarks:

It cannot be the case that, if someone is for example warm, one will know that one is being warmed without knowing whether it is himself or a neighbour, now or last year, in Athens or Egypt, someone alive or dead, a man or a stone. One will therefore know too what one is affected by, for people know one another and the roads, the cities, the food they eat. [Aristocles *apud* Eusebius, *PE*, XIV, 19, 3]

As has been noted (see [O'Keefe 2015, 101–102]), Aristocles' main point in the passage seems to be epistemological: the Cyrenaics cannot know whether it is they that are warmed or someone else, whether they are in Egypt or in Athens, or whether they are human beings or not. As I have argued elsewhere, Aristocles' remark in conjunction with other sources implies a metaphysical message, the essence of which is that the Cyrenaics are involved in denying that

material things in the world, including persons, lack any stable or determinate essence, see [Zilioli 2014, 83–100, 109–113], [Zilioli 2015].

There is, therefore, a credible case for saying that the Cyrenaics would have been confronted with the threat of apraxia brought up at the level of metaphysics. Together with other material items, persons in the Cyrenaic world are too evanescent and time-limited to be the subjects of any ethical systems.²⁴ How then could the Cyrenaics respond to the new, more radical threat of apraxia posed by their own conception of the material world? In answering the question, we will be brought face to face with the originality of Cyrenaic ethics, which will prove to be an original ethics not only of pleasure but also of happiness. My account here will confront, and contrast, two different accounts of Cyrenaic ethics: one, more familiar, offered by Terry Irwin, and a more recent account provided by Kurt Lampe.

5 Pleasure, happiness and the self

How vulnerable are the Cyrenaics to Socrates' criticism that in the world of the subtler thinkers material items (such as persons, as we usually conceive of them) will disappear? Terry Irwin has claimed that the Cyrenaics are the only true exception to Greek eudaimonism, exactly because they lack a conception of the self as a sort of extended and stable entity over time. The Cyrenaics were interested in the particular pleasure of the moment just because they lack such a concept of the self. Their ethics is thus perfectly summed up in their strict, perhaps crude, hedonism: if there is no stable self in the Cyrenaic world, there will be no actual way for the Cyrenaics to be interested in—or, for accounting for—happiness, since happiness requires a somehow stable and enduring subject to be fully enjoyed.²⁵

At least at a first sight, there is no such requirement for the enjoyment of pleasure. Subject S1 may have a pleasure P1 at a time T1; subject S1 is not there any longer at a time T2, but it is perfectly reasonable for us to say that S2 (which is different from S1) will feel a pleasure P2 at time T2. There is a series of subjects at different times, each subject being a different subject from the preceding subject as well as from any subsequent one, all these subjects enjoying different pleasures at their different times. The particular pleasure of the moment is thus the only possible ethical end for ever-changing subjects, since there is no actual way for them to go beyond the narrow limits of their transient and temporary existence in the way possibly needed to enjoy happiness.

24. Nick Pappas has objected to me that, after all, there is no need of a stable self for the very possibility of action. He may be right. There is however surely the need—at least this is what I claim—of a relatively stable agent for the actual possibility of *rational* action (and, hence, for a shared ethics).

25. See [Irwin 1991, 61]. The same view on the Cyrenaics is reaffirmed by Irwin in his more recent history of ethics [Irwin 2007, 44–48].

This is, in very general terms, the kind of hedonism Irwin attributes to the Cyrenaics. Now, while I think that Irwin's interpretation has some strengths, such as pointing out that the Cyrenaic conception of the self, thus construed, is quite different from the classical, standard one, it nevertheless has a major drawback. Irwin's reading cannot explain the fact that the reports about the Cyrenaics in our ancient sources make reference to happiness. For example, the passage of Athenaeus quoted above explicitly says that Aristippus claimed that pleasure is the end of life, and that happiness is based on it. There are also two relevant passages in Diogenes Laertius that clearly show happiness to be relevant in the context of Cyrenaic ethics.

The two passages in question, both of which occur in Diogenes' treatment of the Cyrenaics [DL, II, 65–104], are as follows:

The end is not the same as happiness, since the end is particular pleasure, whereas happiness is a collection made out of particular pleasures. Among these both past and future pleasures are counted together. Particular pleasure is desirable because of itself. On the other hand, happiness is desirable not because of itself, but because of the particular pleasures. [DL, II, 87–88]

There are things productive of certain pleasures that are often of painful nature and are the opposite of pleasure, so that the accumulation of pleasures that does not produce happiness is difficult.²⁶ [DL, II, 90]

I do not see how Irwin's interpretation can explain these passages, which display the Cyrenaics and Aristippus combining their hedonism with a clear concern for happiness. Exactly how they are to be combined is not an easy question; the more recent interpretation provided by Kurt Lampe in his very instructive book on the Cyrenaics [Lampe 2015] does not in my view offer any more satisfactory answer than Irwin. Lampe's interpretation is in many respects opposite to Irwin's. Lampe claims that the Cyrenaics did not question the standard concept of the self: like everyone else, they believed in a stable self that has extended existence over time. (In claiming this, Lampe rejects the Platonic evidence of Plato's *Theaetetus*, rejecting the claim that the subtler thinkers represent Cyrenaic views). Since they adopted a classical view on the self, their ethics will be able to include reference to happiness: somehow or other there will be an ontologically stable subject who, among all the particular pleasures he will be enjoying, will also be able to concern himself with happiness.

26. The text at [DL, II, 90] is disputed, some reading "the accumulation of pleasures that produces happiness is difficult". In the excellent critical edition of Diogenes' *Lives* [Dorandi 2013], *ad locum*, the text adopted is the one I have given in translation. The conceptual point is, I take it, that for the Cyrenaics the difficulty lies in the accumulation of pleasures that does not produce happiness, since accumulating pleasures (whatever painful causes they may have), is in itself a production of happiness.

I have written elsewhere about the strengths and weaknesses of Lampe's interpretation, see [Zilioli 2015]; for our present purposes, I will confine myself to highlighting that I am in full agreement with Lampe in thinking the kind of hedonism as endorsed by the Cyrenaics to be perfectly compatible with a sort of eudaimonism. Yet, if one is genuinely a hedonist—and, as Lampe argues, the Cyrenaics were surely the first serious hedonists in the tradition of Western thought—one will have to conceive of happiness as a quite secondary, derivative aim in one's practical life. The ethical focus in the life of the hedonist is on pleasure, not on happiness. Given the sort of hedonism they appear to have endorsed, for the Cyrenaics the kind of pleasure that is the main focus of their ethical theory is the short-lived, uni-temporal pleasure of the moment. Lampe tends to downplay the feature of uni-temporality as attached to the Cyrenaic concept of pleasure because he thinks there is room in the ancient texts for doing so [Lampe 2015, 56–91], whilst he thinks it is equally credible to grant the Cyrenaics a long-term interest in less evanescent items in one's life such as, for instance, friendship [Lampe 2015, 92–100].

The full acceptance of happiness into their ethics has therefore to be explained in light of the emphasis the Cyrenaics placed on pleasure. Lampe's own explanation seems to give both pleasure and happiness almost the same degree of importance in Cyrenaic ethics. Although he sees the way the Cyrenaics conceived of happiness as always (whether implicitly or explicitly) bringing in pleasure, Lampe's explanation of the value the Cyrenaics put on long-term values such as friendship, benefaction and so on seems liable to reduce their theory to a theory based on happiness, not on pleasure.

In other words, while Irwin attributes too little importance—if any—to happiness in Cyrenaic ethics, treating the Cyrenaics as exclusively concerned with the particular pleasures of the moment, Lampe puts too much emphasis on happiness and long-term values, too little on the role of uni-temporal pleasure. There is, however, in my view, a third possible way of looking at the whole question: one that both retains the focus of Cyrenaic thinking on the particular pleasure of the moment and at the same time accords an important role to happiness.

The two last passages of Diogenes Laertius quoted above (that is, [DL, II, 87–88, 90]) make the particular pleasure of the moment central to Cyrenaic ethics, and likewise both insist—as I think they should—on the secondary importance of happiness. Happiness is defined as a “collection” [*sustêma*] of particular pleasures or as an “accumulation” [*athroisma*] of pleasures. Both terms, *sustêma* and *athroisma*, in the philosophical lexicon of Ancient Greeks refer to a compound of parts, but with the emphasis always on the parts rather than on the compound [LSJ, s.v.]. In Aristotle and in Epicurus, for instance, *athroisma* always refers to something that is to be understood as the mere sum of its parts and cannot be viewed as a proper whole displaying an essential ontological unity, see [Arist., *Generation of Animals*, 4.8.77b30], [Epicurus, *Letter to Herodotus*, 56, 62, 69]. The term refers to what we nowadays would call “bundles” of parts or properties, that is, to something that, metaphysically

speaking, is just an aggregate of parts lacking a well-unified and definite structure.

Diogenes could scarcely have used a better term to explain the linkage between pleasure and happiness in the context of Cyrenaic ethics; I think, in fact, that he does not only report their view accurately but uses their actual wording. Happiness is to be seen as an aggregate of pleasures, the Cyrenaics claimed, because what matters to the picture is the actual parts of which happiness is to be compounded, that is, particular pleasures. Happiness is not for the Cyrenaics a well-defined whole, something over and above the sum of its parts. It is best seen as a loose aggregate of its parts, which are somehow more essential in their singular peculiarity than the whole that is composed from them.

If the interpretation I suggest is viable, the Cyrenaics can indeed be taken as retaining the core of their pioneering hedonism, while allowing for happiness as a derivative, as a secondary aim of their ethics. Interestingly enough, the term *athroisma* is used in the *Theaetetus* exactly in the section of the subtler thinkers and, more importantly, in the part of that section where Socrates forces them to face the unpalatable metaphysical consequence of their theory. Socrates warns us that what we call “man” or “stone” will be best seen as an aggregate [*athroisma*] of parts, if one adopts the theory of the subtler thinkers.²⁷

This brings us back to Lampe, Irwin and the topic of the self. Denying the Cyrenaics any concern for happiness, Irwin claimed that they had no conception of the self as subsisting over time. By contrast, Lampe claimed to show that happiness matters for the Cyrenaics, while leaving them conceive of the self as a stable and enduring entity over time. My own interpretation which has the Cyrenaics mainly concerned on pleasure but also with a clear commitment to happiness brings with it a conception of the self that refuses to be “all or nothing”, to use Parfit’s expressions in the ever illuminating section on personal identity of *Reasons and Persons* [Parfit 1984, part III].

In Parfit’s view, the question of identity of persons through time has been traditionally conceived as having a definite answer. As for the positive approach, we are the same person over time, despite the inevitable and undeniable changes we undergo, because there are either psychological or physical criteria allowing us to say that our identity through time is preserved. Alternatively, we can’t be seen as the same person over time because there is no definite criterion guaranteeing the preservation of our identity. On this account, personal identity is therefore an all-or-nothing view.

Parfit refuses to adopt the traditional approach; he claims that what matters is not personal identity but a more essential relation R, which is

27. “The rule applies to talk both about the individual case and about many grouped together—the sort of grouping [*athroismati*] for which people posit ‘man’ and ‘stone’, and so on for each animal and each kind of thing” [Plato, *Tht.*, 157b9–c1, Rowe’s translation].

broadly defined as a sort of loose psychological connectedness or continuity between different selves or persons. Relation R links together all the different kinds of persons we happen to be in the kind of life we lead. According to Parfit, the person I am today is different both from the person I was yesterday and also from the person I will be tomorrow; there is no psychological or physical criterion that will ultimately allow me to say that, despite all the changes I undergo, I am the same person over time. My personal identity is thus not preserved. But, Parfit argues, personal identity is not what matters.

What really matters is that the different selves I am over time are R-related; that is, these different selves are connected by a loose relation of psychological connectedness or continuity. Differently from personal identity, relation R is not an all-or-nothing view: despite lacking a criterion of identity over time, relation R allows us to think of the different selves we are through time as psychologically continuous, although not identical.²⁸

To go back to the Cyrenaics: they could have explained the concurrence of pleasure and happiness in their ethics if they had refused to adopt an all-or-nothing conception of the self and had instead defended an idea of the self as displaying a kind of connectedness, issuing in a sort of loose psychological continuity over time. This sort of self enjoying this particular pleasure at this particular time is different from the self that enjoyed another pleasure yesterday and will also be different from the self that will enjoy another pleasure tomorrow. Yet, although all these selves are actually different, they are not totally different: there will be a relation of psychological connectedness between them that will ultimately allow the subject composed by such diverse selves to enjoy a sort of final happiness, that is, as Diogenes puts it, a happiness that is best conceived of as the sum of all the particular pleasures enjoyed.

We have so far no extant evidence that the Cyrenaics actually held such a Parfitian view of the self. But it is the only view, I claim, which would have been theoretically tenable by the Cyrenaics if they wanted to include

28. This change of perspective is for Parfit truly refreshing: “When I believed that my existence was such a further fact (that is, an all-or nothing view) I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air. There is still a difference between my life and the lives of other people. But the difference is less. Other people are closer. I am less concerned about the rest of my own life, and more concerned about the lives of others”. A few other quotations from [Parfit 1984] will help the reader; “I can now define two general relations: *Psychological connectedness* is the holding of particular direct psychological connections; *Psychological continuity* is the holding of overlapping chains of strong connectedness” [Parfit 1984, 206]; “Our identity over time just involves (a) Relation (R)—psychological connectedness and/or psychological continuity—with the right kind of cause” [Parfit 1984, 216]; “Personal identity is not what matters. What fundamentally matters is Relation R, with any cause. This relation is what matters even when, as in a case where one person is R-related to two other people, relation R does not provide personal identity” [Parfit 1984, 217].

a reference to happiness in their ethics, while also retaining the core of their original hedonism. Ancient speculation on the self was quite developed²⁹—and it is not beyond the bounds of possibilities that one day evidence might be found establishing that the Cyrenaics actually did hold the sort of Parfitian view of the self I have attached to them. In any case, the Parfitian view provides a solution for the Cyrenaics, namely the one they might have or would have wanted to offer whether they actually thought of it or not. If my reconstruction is correct, the metaphysical charge of apraxia levelled by Socrates against the subtler thinkers of Plato’s *Theaetetus*, a.k.a. the Cyrenaics—on both Vuillemin’s interpretation and mine—will not hold. A subject there will be: one with a loose, fragmented identity, yet a suitable subject for an ethics of pleasure with happiness in a secondary, subordinate, but important role.

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29. One may think of Epicharmus, a Pythagorean thinker of the fifth century BCE, who formulated an argument called the Growing Argument [*Auxanomenos Logos*], purporting to show that every change in a subject implies the very existence of a new subject: see [DL, III, 11] and [Plutarch, *Comm. not.*, 1083a–1084a].

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