

## INTRODUCTION

Diego E. Machuca

Over the past three decades, there has been a growing interest in the philosophy of the Hellenistic and Roman Imperial periods, and hence in the different strands of ancient skepticism. Although scholars of ancient philosophy have studied so-called Academic skepticism and the skeptical elements of medical Empiricism, it is especially scholarship on the Pyrrhonian tradition, with its own complex internal transformations,<sup>1</sup> which has undergone a remarkable advance.<sup>2</sup> The renewed interest in Pyrrhonism has resulted in an impressive number of specialist articles and monographs as well as in quite a few new translations of the extant writings of the second-century physician Sextus Empiricus.<sup>3</sup> One of the reasons for focusing attention on Pyrrhonism is to be found in the fact that Sextus, who was one of the leading representatives of the Pyrrhonian tradition, is the only ancient skeptic from whom complete and substantial works remain which provide a detailed account and defense of a skeptical outlook. We still possess the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in three books, *Against the Professors* in six books, and *Against the Dogmatists* in five books.<sup>4</sup> In the case of the other Greek skeptics we have to content ourselves with fragments, testimonies, and second-hand summaries. As

---

<sup>1</sup> The ancient Pyrrhonian tradition extends from the fourth century BC to the second century AD. On the significant changes undergone by this philosophic tradition, see especially Bett (2000) and the relevant chapters in Brochard (2002).

<sup>2</sup> This progress in the study of Pyrrhonism has also improved our knowledge and understanding of both Academic skepticism and medical Empiricism, given the strong mutual connections between the three traditions. On their similarities and dissimilarities, see Machuca (2008), 42–50 with references to the relevant literature.

<sup>3</sup> The main monographs are Annas and Barnes (1985), Barnes (1990), Vogt (1998), Brennan (1999), Bett (2000), Bailey (2002), Polito (2004), La Sala (2005), Pérez-Jean (2005), Corti (2009), and Perin (2010). Among the translations of Sextus' works, the following must be mentioned: Annas and Barnes (2000), Spinelli (1995, 2000), Mates (1996), Pellegrin (1997), Bett (1997, 2005), Blank (1998), Flückiger (1998), Dalimier et al. (2002), and Grgić (2008).

<sup>4</sup> What we now know as *Against the Dogmatists* was preceded by a general treatment of Pyrrhonism similar to that found in the first book of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. This lost part seems to have consisted of five books. See Janáček (1963), Blomqvist (1974), and Machuca (2008), 31–35.

for Cicero, a mitigated Academic skeptic, neither of the two editions of the *Academica* (his most important work on the philosophy of the skeptical Academy) has survived in its entirety: of the first edition, made up of two books, there remains only the second; and of the second edition, composed of four books, we only have about half of the first.

But the main reason for the current popularity of Pyrrhonism is that Sextus' surviving writings expound a subtle and thought-provoking outlook which scholars of ancient philosophy now widely appreciate and deem worthy of careful consideration. Moreover, the Pyrrhonian argumentative arsenal poses a serious epistemological challenge for present-day analytic philosophers, as it did for early modern thinkers. Indeed, while after Sextus Pyrrhonism seems to have aroused extremely limited interest among late ancient thinkers, in the Renaissance it began to recover the force it had had particularly from the first century BC to the second century AD. This was made possible thanks especially to the publication of Henri Estienne's Latin translation of Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in 1562 and of Gentian Hervet's Latin translation of *Against the Professors* and *Against the Dogmatists* in 1569. The rediscovery and resurgence of the ancient Pyrrhonian arguments was going to play a crucial role in the formation of early modern thought by triggering what Richard Popkin called a "Pyrrhonian crisis".<sup>5</sup> In a similar way, today we witness not only a growing interest in the Pyrrhonian stance among scholars of both ancient and early modern philosophy, but also among epistemologists in the analytic tradition. These have encountered a serious philosophical challenge in the Pyrrhonian arguments against the rational justification of our beliefs, namely, the so-called Five Modes of Agrippa.<sup>6</sup>

The present volume brings together eight essays on ancient Pyrrhonism which discuss issues not previously examined or reconsider old ones from a different perspective, thus proposing new interpretations and advancing the scholarly study of the Pyrrhonian philosophy. Motivating the project was the absence of a collection of original papers entirely devoted to examining in depth a wide range of topics relating to ancient Pyrrhonism, a gap that needed to be filled due to the philosophical

---

<sup>5</sup> On the major impact of Pyrrhonism on early modern philosophy, see especially Popkin (2003).

<sup>6</sup> For contemporary epistemological discussions of the so-called Pyrrhonian problematic, see e.g. Fogelin (1994), Sosa (1997), Lammenranta (2003, 2008), Williams (2004), and Klein (2008).

import of this form of skepticism.<sup>7</sup> In addition, a collection taking into consideration the studies published in the last fifteen or twenty years was in order. The new attention focused on ancient Pyrrhonism in studies of early modern philosophy and in contemporary epistemological discussions may be considered a further reason for putting together a volume of original scholarly essays. For in such studies and discussions one sometimes finds certain serious misunderstandings regarding the nature of the Pyrrhonian outlook.

The issues addressed in the essays collected here are diverse: the relationship between Sextus' and Aenesidemus' views on the skeptical interpretation of Plato; the differences between Pyrrhonism and Cyrenaicism; Sextus' discussion of our access to our own mental states; the Pyrrhonist's stance on ordinary life; his uncommitted acceptance of piety; Sextus' attitude towards language; his outlook on ethics; and the relationship between Pyrrhonism and epistemic internalism and externalism. In exploring these issues, some of the papers draw comparisons between ancient Pyrrhonism and contemporary philosophical positions. By identifying certain key differences and similarities, such comparisons make it possible to gain a better understanding and appreciation of the Pyrrhonian stance.

As one might expect, the perspective adopted in the analysis of the foregoing subjects is primarily exegetical and historical. At times, however, the papers take a more systematic approach, discussing the philosophical merits of the positions examined or thinking about the problems they pose. This will make the volume more appealing to those who are less concerned with exegetical and historical issues, or who think that the worth of the history of philosophy lies in its potential to introduce us to questions and problems we have not thought of before or to help us think more clearly about questions and problems addressed in contemporary philosophy by showing us other ways to look at them or deal with them.

---

<sup>7</sup> The previous single- or multi-authored collections dealing with ancient Pyrrhonism differ from the present volume in that they: restrict their focus to a specific controversy (Burnyeat & Frede 1997) or to a specific work of Sextus' (Delattre 2006); are devoted also to the other forms of ancient skepticism or the other Hellenistic philosophies (Giannantoni 1981, Voelke 1990, Brunschwig 1995, Striker 1996, Long 2006, Bett 2010); bring together formerly published essays (Brunschwig 1995, Striker 1996, Burnyeat & Frede 1997, Spinelli 2005, Long 2006); examine skeptical thought throughout history, not only in antiquity (Burnyeat 1983, Sihvola 2000, De Caro & Spinelli 2007); or address ancient Pyrrhonism only incidentally (Sinnott-Armstrong 2004).

The volume does not intend to provide a comprehensive examination of the ancient Pyrrhonian tradition. Although some of the essays refer to the outlooks of Pyrrho, Timon, and Aenesidemus, the theme of this collection is Sextan Pyrrhonism. This is due to reasons already mentioned: Sextus is our primary source for Pyrrhonian skepticism, and the philosophical stance expounded in his writings is more challenging and sophisticated than what we find in other sources. It should be noted, however, that Sextus' works contain elements deriving from different phases of the history of ancient Pyrrhonism; what is more, distinct and even incompatible varieties of Pyrrhonism appear to coexist in his writings.<sup>8</sup> Still, it is in the end possible (if sometimes difficult) to identify the skeptical outlook Sextus officially intends to defend and to differentiate it from the positions ascribed to earlier Pyrrhonists by the fragments, testimonies, and summaries found in our extant sources. It will be useful to keep in mind the complexity of Sextus' works and the multifaceted nature of the ancient Pyrrhonian tradition while reading some of the essays here collected.

When, at the end of the first book of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus examines the differences between Pyrrhonism and its neighboring philosophies, he discusses the views of those who regard Plato either as a full-blown skeptic or at least as a partial skeptic. The question of the skepticism of Plato was a matter of fierce discussion inside and outside the Academy in the Hellenistic and Early Imperial ages, and it is the object today of intense debate among scholars. In the first essay of the collection, Mauro Bonazzi explores this vexed question within the context of the Pyrrhonian tradition, taking into account the recent literature on the subject. On the basis of a philological and exegetical analysis of the relevant texts, he argues that, in rejecting the view that Plato can be deemed a real skeptic, Sextus is not opposing the interpretation defended by previous Pyrrhonists (in particular, Aenesidemus), but siding with them.

Tim O'Keefe's essay examines the philosophical relationship between Pyrrhonism and another of its neighboring philosophies, namely, Cyrenaicism. The two philosophies seem to have a key trait in common, namely, the claim that our "feelings" or "affections" (πάθη) alone can

---

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of the main tensions detectable in Sextus' extant works, see Machuca (2008), 51–57.

be apprehended. O'Keefe argues that, on closer inspection, there exists a crucial difference between them: the Pyrrhonist refrains from accepting the Cyrenaic account of the nature of our perceptual states and our epistemic access to them, the reason being that such an account rests upon questionable theoretical commitments about which he cannot but suspend judgment.

Next, James Warren deals with a brief argument against the existence of god found in Sextus' inquiry into dogmatic theology in the third book of *Against the Dogmatists*. The argument is in part based on the thesis that knowledge of what pain is like by nature can be acquired only if one experiences this feeling. Warren singles out the primary target of the argument, examines what is involved in possessing knowledge of pain, and explores the rationale for the above thesis and its relevance to understanding the ancient conception of subjectivity. He also lays out the important differences between Sextus' treatment of the possibility of acquiring knowledge of the experience of pain and contemporary discussions of the topic. Sextus shows no signs of being committed to the view that the subject has privileged and incorrigible access to his own private, subjective states as opposed to the kind of access he has to the external world. On this point, the reader will find interesting connections with the subject matter of O'Keefe's essay.

There exists among specialists a long-standing debate about whether Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment (ἐποχή) is restricted to philosophico-scientific beliefs or extends also to everyday or common-sense beliefs. Filip Grgić's contribution is relevant to this debate because it deals with the Pyrrhonist's attitude towards ordinary life. Sextus' remark that the Pyrrhonist lives in accordance with the observance of everyday life is not only a way to respond to the charge that, owing to his skepticism, the Pyrrhonist is reduced to inactivity (the famous ἀπραξία objection). Sextus also sometimes depicts the Pyrrhonist as a champion of everyday life, which seems to imply that his activities and states of mind are those of ordinary people. Grgić explores what conception of everyday life Sextus has in mind when claiming to be its advocate and to what extent this professed advocacy is compatible with Pyrrhonism and entails a reform of everyday life. His main thesis is that, when ordinary beliefs come under Pyrrhonian attack, what is actually targeted is not these beliefs *per se*, but their use as parts of philosophical arguments.

The topic of Harald Thorsrud's contribution partially relates to that of the previous essay. Sextus tells us that the Pyrrhonist suspends judgment about the nature and existence of gods. But he also points out

that, in agreement with ordinary life and without holding opinions, the Pyrrhonist says that gods exist and are provident and accepts piety as good. Thorsrud examines whether Sextus' remarks on Pyrrhonian piety are insincere or disingenuous, whether the Pyrrhonist holds ordinary religious beliefs, and whether the performance of pious actions necessarily presupposes the possession of religious beliefs. He contends that the Pyrrhonist can sincerely engage in religious practices by following the way things appear to him and the emotional states he experiences.

Stéphane Marchand explores the Pyrrhonist's attitude towards language by examining the skeptical style of writing that can be identified in Timon's extant fragments and particularly in Sextus' surviving works. The key question is how a Pyrrhonist can write and communicate his outlook if he suspends judgment about whether anything can be taught and learned and, more generally, about whether anything can be known. In order to avoid dogmatism, Timon adopted a literary style characterized by symbolic language and parody. Sextus, for his part, invented a skeptical rhetoric defined by the claim that the Pyrrhonist's utterances are subjective avowals which do not purport to offer an objective description of reality, as well as by a pragmatic use of language and a particular approach to the history of philosophy.

My contribution focuses on Sextus' *Against the Ethicists*, a text which has puzzled some interpreters because of its departure from the official Pyrrhonian attitude of suspension of judgment by apparently defending what can be viewed as a moderate form of ethical realism. Instead of refraining from asserting whether anything really is good, bad, or indifferent, Sextus seems both to deny that anything is such by nature or invariably and to affirm that things are good, bad, or indifferent only relative to different people, moments, or circumstances. I argue that, although at times Sextus does seem to deny ethical absolutism, a careful textual analysis shows that nothing said in *Against the Ethicists* supports the view that he endorses a form of ethical realism.

Otávio Bueno closes the volume with a paper that challenges Jonathan Barnes' claim that the Pyrrhonist is in the end committed to epistemic internalism. Bueno first remarks that Barnes' discussion of externalism actually relies on too simplified a conception of this theory, and that the externalist has resources to respond to the internalist arguments allegedly endorsed by the Pyrrhonist. He then argues that, given that internalism (just as externalism) is a theory about the nature of knowledge and justification, it is a view which the Pyrrhonist cannot consistently embrace. Both externalists and internalists offer arguments in favor of their com-

peting epistemological positions, and given that these arguments strike the Pyrrhonist as equally persuasive, he is led to suspension of judgment. Therefore, the internalist arguments against externalism advanced by the Pyrrhonist are merely dialectical.

It is our hope that the present collection will help attract further attention to the history and significance of Greek Pyrrhonism not only among scholars of ancient philosophy, but also among those interested in the legacy of Pyrrhonian skepticism in early modern and contemporary philosophy.

### *Bibliography*

- Annas, J., & Barnes, J. (1985). *The Modes of Scepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . (2000). *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism*. 2nd edition (1st ed. 1994). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bailey, A. (2002). *Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonian Scepticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Barnes, J. (1990). *The Toils of Scepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bett, R. (1997). *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Ethicists*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . (2000). *Pyrrho, his Antecedents, and his Legacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . (2005). *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Logicians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . (ed.). (2010). *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Blank, D. (1998). *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Grammarians*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Blomqvist, J. (1974). "Die Skeptika des Sextus Empiricus," *Grazer Beiträge* 2: 7–14.
- Brennan, T. (1999). *Ethics and Epistemology in Sextus Empiricus*. New York & London: Garland Publishing.
- Brochard, V. (2002). *Les Sceptiques grecs*. 4th edition (1st ed. 1887). Paris: Le livre de poche.
- Brunschwig, J. (1995). *Études sur les philosophies hellénistiques*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Burnyeat, M. (ed.). (1983). *The Skeptical Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burnyeat, M., & Frede, M. (eds.). (1997). *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Corti, L. (2009). *Scepticisme et langage*. Paris: Vrin.
- Dalimier, C. et al. (2002). *Sextus Empiricus: Contre les professeurs*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

- De Caro, M., & Spinelli, E. (eds.). (2007). *Scetticismo: Una vicenda filosofica*. Roma: Carocci.
- Delattre, J. (ed.). (2006). *Sur le Contre les professeurs de Sextus Empiricus*. Lille: Presses de l'Université de Charles-de-Gaulle-Lille 3.
- Flückiger, H. (1998). *Sextus Empiricus: Gegen die Dogmatiker (M VII–XI)*. Sankt Augustin: Academia.
- Fogelin, R. (1994). *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Giannantoni, G. (ed.). (1981). *Lo scetticismo antico*, 2 vols. Napoli: Bibliopolis.
- Greco, J. (ed.). (2008). *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Grgić, F. (2008). *Sekst Empirik: Obrisi pironizma*. Zagreb: Kruzak.
- Janáček, K. (1963). "Die Hauptschrift des Sextus Empiricus als Torso erhalten?" *Philologus* 107: 271–277.
- Klein, P. (2008). "Contemporary Responses to Agrippa's Trilemma," 484–503 in Greco (2008).
- La Sala, R. (2005). *Die Züge des Skeptikers. Der dialektische Charakter von Sextus Empiricus' Werk*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Lammenranta, M. (2003). "Reliabilism, Circularity, and the Pyrrhonian Problematic," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 28: 315–332.
- . (2008). "The Pyrrhonian Problematic," 9–33 in Greco (2008).
- Long, A.A. (2006). *From Epicurus to Epictetus: Studies in Hellenistic and Roman Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Machuca, D.E. (2008). "Sextus Empiricus: His Outlook, Works, and Legacy," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 55: 28–63.
- Mates, B. (1996). *The Skeptic Way: Sextus Empiricus's Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pellegrin, P. (1997). *Sextus Empiricus: Esquisses pyrrhoniennes*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Pérez-Jean, B. (2005). *Dogmatisme et scepticisme: L'héraclitisme d'Énésidème*. Lille: Septentrion.
- Perin, C. (2010). *The Demands of Reason: An Essay on Pyrrhonian Scepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Polito, R. (2004). *The Sceptical Road: Aenesidemus' Appropriation of Heraclitus*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.
- Popkin, R. (2003). *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sihvola, J. (ed.). (2000). *Ancient Scepticism and the Sceptical Tradition (Acta Philosophica Fennica 66)*. Helsinki: Philosophical Society of Finland.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (ed.). (2004). *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sosa, E. (1997). "How to Resolve the Pyrrhonian Problematic: A Lesson from Descartes," *Philosophical Studies* 85: 227–249.
- Spinelli, E. (1995). *Sesto Empirico: Contro gli etici*. Napoli: Bibliopolis.
- . (2000). *Sesto Empirico: Contro gli astrologi*. Napoli: Bibliopolis.
- . (2005). *Questioni scettiche: Letture introduttive al pironismo antico*. Roma: Lithos.



- Striker, G. (1996). *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Voelke, A.-J. (ed.). (1990). *Le scepticisme antique: perspectives historiques et systématiques*. Cahiers de la Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie 15.
- Vogt, K. (1998). *Skepsis und Lebenspraxis: Das pyrrhonische Leben ohne Meinungen*. München: Alber Verlag.
- Williams, M. (2004). "The Agrippan Argument and Two Forms of Skepticism," 121–145 in Sinnott-Armstrong (2004).