

Passions, Affections, and Emotions: A Coherent Pyrrhonian Approach

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1. May we plan to conduct our everyday life without referring to any kind of emotion or passion? Or, more radically, may we suppose that there is a philosophical theory claiming either to eliminate all affections or to at least control them thanks to a strong and prescriptively binding use of a form of rationality?

I do not wish to devote much time to the big names of the Classical age in Greece, Plato and Aristotle; rather, I would like to concentrate my attention on later times, since some ancient philosophical schools of the Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic period (especially the Epicureans and Stoics) tried precisely to go in the direction of a strong and prescriptive use of human rationality as a means to keep our moral life under control.

Let me only insist on one author, whose commitment to a dogmatic approach to ethics and accordingly to the management of our (negative) emotions and passions is patently clear: Epicurus¹.

The ethical part of Epicurus's doctrine may be seen as its culmination, since it represents the actual *telos* of his philosophy as a powerful therapy against any kind of psychological evil.²

To appreciate the real meaning of this therapeutic turning point we could read the *Key doctrines* 11 and 12. They describe the functional relationship of subordination of physics to ethics, and confirm that correct understanding of the constitution of reality is necessary in order to obtain happiness, understood as pure pleasure due to the absence of pain in the body (*ἀπονία*) and of trouble in the soul (*ἀταραξία*):

11. If we had never been molested by alarms at celestial and atmospheric phenomena, nor by the misgiving that death somehow affects us, nor by neglect of the proper limits of pains and desires, we should not have had any need to study natural science.

¹ On the epistemological and practical role played by *pathe* in Epicurus's philosophy, also in comparison with the Cyrenaics, see now Verde 2018.

² See paradigmatically fr. 221 Usener; on the role of *philosophia medicans* as an Epicurean *topos*, see e.g. Gigante 1975.

12. It would be impossible to banish fear on matters of the highest importance, if a man did not know the nature of the whole universe, but lived in dread of what the legends tell us. Hence without the study of nature there was no enjoyment of unmixed pleasures³.

Epicurus's argument is presented as a hypothesis, yet aims to be strongly prescriptive. The Epicurean devotes himself to the study of reality *only* because he knows that this is necessary to erase the roots of our troubles and doubts. Once we accept the consistent explanation of our world (as well as of other infinite worlds around us), any reason for anxiety will disappear and we will live more and more in conformity with nature⁴. No dangerous role assigned to the gods⁵, no negative or terrifying value attached to our death⁶, no unbearable level of pain⁷, and no prospect of unattainable pleasures⁸ will hold our everyday life in check.

This is the confident announcement of the so-called *τετραφάρμακος*, explicitly illustrated in the rich argumentative texture of Epicurus's *Letter to Menoecus*. It is briefly repeated in the first four *Key doctrines* and also laconically abridged by Philodemus – evidently, in both cases for the sake of easier memorization – through the use of a formula that immediately comes to mind and proves really helpful to everyone (including, I suppose, slaves and women). The formula is: “God presents no fears, death no worries. And while good is readily attainable, evil is readily endurable”⁹.

Without dwelling on the positions adopted by Epicurus and by the first members of the Stoic school (which were equally dogmatic and prescriptive¹⁰), I think that no one could contend or grant that emotions, passions, and affections play a special role in another philosophical movement of that time and of the Imperial age, namely Pyrrhonism (or better neo-Pyrrhonism). However, one should avoid endorsing the negative evaluation formulated by some ancient authors (as well as by contemporary scholars), who maintain that sceptical

³ Epicurus, *Key doctrines* 11-2 (tr. Hicks 1979, II, p. 667). On the ‘cathartic’ and ‘didactic’ function of Epicurus’ *physiologia* see Manolidis 1987, p. 104-113; see also Spinelli 2019.

⁴ On this question see Morel 2003 and 2009, p. 161-206.

⁵ Indeed, they exercise no ‘providential’ function, and have no positive or negative interest in human affairs, since they live completely undisturbed and happy in the *intermundia*, as attested by later sources: see e.g. Cic. *ND* 1.18; *fin.* 2.75; *div.* 2.40; Philodemus, *De dis* 3.8.31. For a survey on this difficult topic see Santoro 2000, p. 43-65; Wifstrand Schiebe 2003 and Kany-Turpin 2007; more generally see also Essler 2011; Konstan 2011; Sedley 2011, Spinelli 2015a, and now Piergiacomi 2017.

⁶ Since it is absolutely nothing within the radically materialistic framework of the Epicurean doctrine: on this topic see at least Warren 2009; more in detail, on the Epicurean notion of death, see also Warren 2004 and Tsouna 2006 (esp. on Philodemus’ position).

⁷ On this specific topic see also Laurand 2003.

⁸ On this question see at least Woolf 2009.

⁹ Philodemus, *To the school-fellows* (*PHerc.* 1005 col. 5.9-13 ed. Angeli), tr. Long-Sedley 1987, 1, p. 156; for a useful commentary on this passage, see Angeli 1988, pp. 261-70 and 50-61; for a new, different reconstruction of the title of this Philodemian work (*Pros tous phaskobybliakous*) see, however, Del Mastro, p. 185.

¹⁰ On the Stoic doctrine of the passions see at least Ioppolo 1995 and some useful observations in Graver 2007.

thinkers like the Pyrrhonists cannot offer any coherent theory about the ethical life and its emotional side, since – as underlined by Aristotle (*Metaph.* IV 4, 1006a14–5) and by Plato (*Theaet.* 171d) before him – they are similar to plants which are deprived of good nourishment and therefore paralyzed, insofar as they are incapable of acting according to firm or, better, absolute moral reference points. But do Pyrrhonists really ignore the multifarious, difficult, and complex web of all those passions and emotions that crowd and sometimes influence or change the course of our everyday life? If we carefully analyze Sextus Empiricus’s rich *corpus*, this negative impression (or prejudice perhaps) simply disappears, since he indeed examines the ethical role, moral weight, and operative function of emotional attitudes. Accordingly, in some relevant passages on which I shall focus my attention, Sextus considers the passionate elements of our agency in order to show at least two important features of the Pyrrhonian moral stance: 1. the existence and pertinence of a ‘theoretical impassivity’, which is however limited to the realm of opinions; and 2. the plain acceptance of some natural affections, defended against the background of a new idea of behaviouristic and pragmatic dispositions.

2. There are many passages where Sextus describes (or doxographically quotes) theories and doctrines about the crucial role of ἀπάθεια. Let me offer only three clear examples. One should first of all recall Xenophanes’ attribution to the divinity/divine entity of a strong form of (moral or, better, more widely ethical) impassivity (along with other basic traits, such as intrinsic goodness, immutability, and perfect rationality – see PH I 225 and III 219); or, again, the steady physical and materialistic impassivity that some ancient atomistic thinkers (namely, Democritus and Epicurus) grant to atoms, the first elements or στοιχεῖα of reality (see M X 318 and X 311)¹¹; or again, in the case of the specific notion of time attributed to the Epicurean thinker Demetrius Lacon, the dialectical interplay of the basic passions of pleasure and pain due to the presence of affections or lack of them (τά τε πάθη καὶ αἱ ἀπάθειαι: see M X 225; M X 219, 224, 242, and also PH III 137)¹². Nor can anyone deny that for dialectical and anti-dogmatic purposes Sextus sometimes advances the hypothesis that sensation might present itself as “impassive”, as well as deprived of movement and change (see M VII 160: ἀκίνητος μὲν οὖσα καὶ ἀπαθὴς καὶ ἄτρεπτος). Indeed, he even ‘states’ that, for example, when something sweet changes into something bitter, it cannot remain ἀπαθὲς καὶ ἀνετεροίωτον (M VIII 455). Finally, as part of his strong polemical attack against the geometrical definition

¹¹ On these passages see also Warren 2015, p. 368–372.

¹² For a clear and useful analysis of this question, see Verde 2013, p. 122–129.

of length, Sextus suggests eliminating from the very definition of “flesh” or *σάρξ* its constitutive feature of vulnerability, since it should be rather described as “invulnerable and impassive” (*ἄτρωτόν τε καὶ ἀπαθῆ*: M III 55).

All these quotations show that Sextus here is calling into question a lexicon of impassivity that is proper to his dogmatic enemies and not to the genuinely sceptical and Pyrrhonian attitude.

3. Is there at least one passage where we can safely find the notion of *apatheia* or impassivity used *in propria persona* by Sextus to clarify the ‘positive’ ethical Pyrrhonian solution? Fortunately enough, the answer is totally positive.

Here is the text, inserted in that part of the third book of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* entirely devoted to ethical quarrels and questions:

(235) The Sceptics, then, seeing such anomaly in objects¹³, suspend judgement as to whether anything is by nature good or bad, or generally to be done, here too refraining from dogmatic rashness; and they follow the observance of everyday life without holding opinions. *They therefore remain without feeling in matters of opinion and with moderation of feeling in matters forced upon them:* (236) being human, they are affected by way of their senses; but, not having the additional opinion that the way they are affected is by nature bad, their feelings are moderate. For having such an additional opinion about something is worse than actually feeling it: sometimes patients undergoing surgery or something of the kind bear it, while the onlookers faint because of their opinion that what is happening is bad (*my italics*)¹⁴.

These paragraphs are the final part of a more articulated attack against those dogmatic ethical doctrines which pretend to have the final say on both what is *absolutely or better φύσει* good or bad or indifferent and on what the legitimate boundaries of moral *πρᾶξις* are. The objective dissonance (or, technically, *διαφωνία*) generated by the different and conflicting

¹³ On the causal principle of Pyrrhonian philosophy, linked to a widespread *ἀνωμαλία τῶν πραγμάτων*, see PH I 12, 26, 29, and also M I 6, with some useful observations in Machuca 2019a, p. 44-45.

¹⁴ Here is the Greek text (cf. PH I 25-27; M XI 158-161): [3.235] Ὁ τοίνυν σκεπτικὸς τὴν τοσαύτην ἀνωμαλίαν τῶν πραγμάτων ὁρῶν ἐπέχει μὲν περὶ τοῦ φύσει τι ἀγαθὸν ἢ κακὸν ἢ ὅλως πρακτέον εἶναι, κἂν τούτῳ τῆς δογματικῆς ἀφιστάμενος προπετείας, ἔπειτα δὲ ἀδοξάστως τῇ βιωτικῇ τηρήσει, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο ἐν μὲν τοῖς δοξαστοῖς ἀπαθῆς μένει, ἐν δὲ τοῖς καταναγκασμένοις μετριοπαθεῖ. [3.236] ὡς μὲν γὰρ ἄνθρωπος αἰσθητικὸς πάσχει, μὴ προσδοξάζων δὲ, ὅτι τοῦτο ὃ πάσχει κακὸν ἐστὶ φύσει, μετριοπαθεῖ. τὸ γὰρ προσδοξάζειν τι τοιοῦτο χειρόν ἐστι καὶ αὐτοῦ τοῦ πάσχειν, ὡς ἐνίοτε τοὺς μὲν τεμνομένους ἢ ἄλλο τι τοιοῦτο πάσχοντας φέρειν, τοὺς δὲ παρεστῶτας διὰ τὴν περὶ τοῦ γινομένου δόξαν ὡς φαύλου λειποψυχεῖν.

dogmatic solutions imposes on the sceptic the need to avoid any rash preference for this or that theory and induces him to be cautious and to suspend his judgement (this mechanism is clearly described in *PHI* 8-10¹⁵). Such a strategy is not without consequences from an ethical point of view, since the sceptic can achieve – if only in that restricted field represented by disputes about δόξαι or (dogmatic/philosophical) opinions, namely ἐν τοῖς δοξαστοῖς – the lofty goal of ἀταραξία, “tranquillity” or, even better, the absence of disturbance¹⁶.

Here Sextus seems to add to such freedom from intellectual disturbance a stronger form of moral impassivity. Accordingly, as we read in *PH* III 235, he can even become completely “without feeling”, impassive/ἀπαθής, and therefore capable of distancing himself from any kind of intellectual passion or sufferance. In other words, he can become finally free from all slavery and any forced acceptance of this or that absolute and definitive moral choice. By using in this passage the very significant term ἀπαθής (a *hapax legomenon* in his prose), Sextus seeks to overcome all possible dogmatic disputes, which in his view are quite certainly responsible for the stress linked to battles fostered by more or less radical forms of moral integralism.

Without wishing to trace such an attitude back to the lifestyle which many sources attribute to Pyrrho¹⁷, I think it is undeniable that it can be legitimately linked to what we read about the alleged τέλος or goal of ancient scepticism in Diogenes Laertius, IX 108:

According to some authorities the end proposed by the Sceptics is impassivity; according to others, gentleness (τινὲς δὲ καὶ τὴν ἀπάθειαν ἄλλοι δὲ τὴν πραότητα τέλος εἰπεῖν φασὶ τοὺς σκεπτικούς).

Apart from the use and the range of meanings of the sceptical term πραότης (a moral attitude highly appreciated by Sextus himself¹⁸), one should safely suppose that behind the anonymous ‘others’ mentioned by Diogenes Laertius there lies Sextus and, more precisely, his praise of Pyrrhonian impassivity, as attested in *PH* III 235. Sextus appears to be regarded as the (original) author of a sort of enriched sceptical theory of the moral goal; indeed, he is taken

¹⁵ On the complex overall strategy at work behind the key sceptical concept of ἐποχή, see also Spinelli 2015b.

¹⁶ More generally, on three possible different kinds of doxastic disturbance, their mutual relationship, and the dominant role played by evaluative beliefs, see now Machuca 2019b.

¹⁷ For some relevant texts, see Pyrrho TT. 6, 10, 15 AB, 16, 69 Decleva Caizzi, and her commentary *ad loc.* in Decleva Caizzi 1981; see also Bett 2000, esp. 2.1 and 2.2. Finally, I do not think that in the closing section of Pyrrho T. 53 “the third and missing term was ἀπάθειαν”, *pace* Polito 2014, p. 289.

¹⁸ See, for example, *M* I 6. According to Bett (1997, p. 172), this concept “may be closely related to *metriopatheia*”; an original interpretation of the relationship between ἀπάθεια and πραότης in Pyrrho is offered by Brunschwig 1992.

to ‘improve’ the sceptical moral arsenal, since he celebrates not only the absence of disturbance or ἀταραξία, the condition “where the sceptic manages to achieve a state of no feeling, or no disturbance, at all”¹⁹, but also the complete eradication of all traces of passion or intellectual pathology. In other words, Sextus praises that form of ἀπάθεια that is reached through a special and radical use of polemical λόγος, which is active and valid, however, only in the field of philosophical opinions and doctrines – ἐν τοῖς δοξαστοῖς, as I have already stressed²⁰.

4. As clearly anticipated, this is not the only scenario offered by Sextus with regards to the effective individuation of ethical goals in human life. However, his observations must be evaluated against the background of a more profound philosophical choice. When Sextus attacks dogmatic ethics *tout court*, he must operate on two fronts: he must counter any attempt to anchor behaviour to absolute norms or to equally absolute and unalterable models such as that of the member of the Epicurean Garden or the Stoic wise man. At the same time, he must also provide a coherent alternative for shared living that may be implemented through his action plan. The picture, then, grows clearer: rejecting the dogmatic perspective founded on alleged objective and absolute values does not mean being doomed to inaction. For there is also room to move in another direction.

Therefore, if the theoretical option wavers, or indeed engenders a rigidity which cuts one off from ordinary, common living, how is it possible to regulate one's conduct in everyday life? Perhaps, by anchoring oneself to points of view supported by empirical and “non-philosophical” (albeit not necessarily anti-philosophical) forms of acceptance of what Sextus in several sections of his writing describes as “common life”, or κοινὸς βίος.

Sextus seeks to identify the outcome of his interaction with the world with an external as well as internal disposition (διάθεσις) capable of ensuring a genuine kind of skeptical “happiness,” marked by the simultaneous presence of “tranquillity” (ἀταραξία) and “moderation of feeling” (μετριοπάθεια: see esp. *PH I* 25-30). When Sextus provides a criterion for his own action in the form of what is apparent, or rather the representation of τὸ φαινόμενον, his claims come to reflect the underlying logic of his philosophical approach (see esp. *PH I* 21-22). Sextus does not formulate any strong dogmatic assertions, as if he wished to and could establish with absolute certainty the confines of good and evil, and give the final

¹⁹ Bett 1997, p. 172; for other formulae (ἐν τοῖς κατὰ δόξαν and ἐν ταῖς ζητήσεσιν, respectively in *PH I* 25 and 30) that synonymically replace the expression ἐν μὲν τοῖς δοξαστοῖς, see Decleva Caizzi 1992, p. 299.

²⁰ On the peculiar features of the Pyrrhonian ‘philanthropic’ and ‘therapeutic’ discourse or anti-dogmatic activity, see at least *PH III* 280-281 and also, most recently, Machuca 2019c.

word “about what is right and what is wrong”, or about the strict *rules of engagement* in ethics (as well as politics). The linguistic form he lends his moral conclusions is not intended to disclose any absolute plan for human action, but simply to turn every “is” into “appears²¹”, and thus to provide an account of a complex autobiographical event. In this respect, Sextus’s suggestion of an ethical scenario that could actually be achieved even (or perhaps especially or indeed exclusively) by Pyrrhonists shows itself for what it really is and is intended to be: a “confession” of one’s own inner affections that is made public and hence probably *also* charged with persuasive (yet never veridically cogent) power. After registering the progressive and reciprocal checkmating of all the various dogmatic doctrines, the Pyrrhonist does not seek to give the final word on the alleged existence of objective values in the ethical field. Rather, he simply regulates his own conduct on what currently or on each occasion *appears* to be good or bad²², according to a clearly articulated mechanism of (polemically) active removal of the obstacles set by dogmatic opinions. Instead of overturning these rules of engagement on the level of conduct, Sextus takes a different approach, characterised by a form of passive reception/impression/transmission of unavoidable phenomena connected to the condition of our everyday existence.

To be more precise, one might say that what guides us in this context cannot be the abstract force of philosophical arguments. Rather, we regulate our life on the basis of what everyday experience had offered in the past and continues to offer today. This is what Sextus means when, against the above mentioned charge of “inactivity” (ἀπραξία or ἀνενεργησία), he claims that the Pyrrhonist can act²³ “according to the non-philosophical observance” (κατὰ δὲ τὴν ἀφιλόσοφον τήρησιν: *M* XI 165) or – “without holding beliefs” (ἀδοξάστως) – “according to the observance of everyday life” (κατὰ τὴν βιωτικὴν τήρησιν: *PHI* 23)²⁴.

In the light of the ‘behaviourist’ perspective so constructed, the Sceptic too, therefore, acts and reacts in accordance with his own moral disposition. This will be empirical – linked, that is, to concrete situations and historically conditioned. The Sceptic’s moral attitude will ensure that his path will be untroubled and in alignment with the course of the world. The Pyrrhonist will live free of the dogmatic claim to assign or deny absolute value to norms of behaviour, the latter being simply an integral part of daily life, arising from a continual process

²¹ See *M* XI 18–19, with Spinelli 1995, p. 164–166; for a different explanation, see Bett 1997, p. 58–60.

²² See also Machuca 2019a, p. 46.

²³ Or perhaps and better: he can “be active.” On the very subtle distinction between *to act* (“in the robust sense of the dogmatist’s theory of human action”) and *to be active* (in the sense that Sextus’s sceptic “goes *through the motions* of an ordinary life”), see Vogt 2010, p. 171–172.

²⁴ See also *PHI* 231, 237; II 102, 246, 254, 258; III 235; *M* VIII 158. For a comprehensive survey of Sextus’s position see also Laursen 2016.

of confrontation with the reality of praxis. His actions, however, will not be left to chance to determine; rather, they will follow the four *fundamental categories* laid down by Sextus in a famous passage of his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (PHI 23-24). The list he proposes includes: 1. the guidance of nature, the specific destiny to which human beings must submit as creatures gifted with sensibility and intellect; 2. the necessitation intrinsic to one's primary affects or basic needs, such as hunger and thirst, together with the mechanical reactions that these engender; 3. the tradition associated with prevailing laws and customs, imposed in the form of acceptance of the norms of conduct of the community to which one belongs (to the extent that, for example, the Sceptic too, with regard to religion, will consider piety a good and impiety an evil); 4. the teaching of the arts, understood as conveying the passive learning of established rules or the *know-how* advanced by some relevant τέχναι.

This moral choice appears to be decisively out of step with strong, dogmatic ethical systems, especially because it negates the value often accorded to theory by both philosophers and ordinary people (ιδιώται in the etymological sense of the term). It is a choice that moves within a different horizon, that of 'empirical observance' or τήρησις, which is a form of empirical generalization, but one circumscribed within precise limits²⁵.

The horizon within which it seems inevitable to place this Pyrrhonian ethical option is that of an everyday life articulated into manifold ways of living, freed from the rule of any dogmatic practical reason. Operating in the background is an original *Gegenbenheit* in which each one of us finds himself to have been "thrown" and which cannot therefore be ignored²⁶. With regards to the force of everyday experience, this opens the way for the second goal accepted by Pyrrhonists: the so called μετριοπάθεια²⁷. The picture that emerges from this new and original moral attitude is aptly described by Sextus in a short, but dense passage, that I would like to read as the final 'spirit' of his philosophical message>

(29) We do not, however, take Sceptics to be undisturbed in every way – we say that they are disturbed by things which are forced upon them; for we agree that at times they shiver and are thirsty and have other feelings of this kind. (30) But in these cases ordinary people are afflicted by two sets of circumstances: by the feelings themselves, and no less by

²⁵ For a more careful analysis on the concept of τήρησις see Spinelli 2004 and also Marchand 2015.

²⁶ See esp. Hossenfelder 1968, p. 83. And this is valid even if we are faced with the unspeakable ruling norms that will be at work in a completely unjust, racist, and cruel society (on this aspect see Thorsrud 2003, p. 248): a society governed by a tyrant, to mention an extreme example – a genuine case study for political reflection *tout court* (see *M XI* 160-166); As regards the Sceptic's reaction to the cruel orders of a tyrant, let me here refer to Spinelli 2015c, p. 24-29, with other textual and bibliographical references.

²⁷ One should always remember that «sceptics can consistently claim that as a matter of fact they have an end, provided that they do not, in contrast with the Dogmatists, make any attempt to justify it» (Hankinson 1995, p. 320, n. 31).

believing that these circumstances are bad by nature. Sceptics, who shed the additional opinion that each of these things is bad in its nature, come off *more moderately* even in these cases. This, then, is why we say that the aim of Sceptics is *tranquillity in matters of opinion* and *moderation of feeling in matters forced upon us* (*my italics*).

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