

**SEXTUS EMPIRICUS IN BRIAN RIBEIRO'S  
*SEXTUS, MONTAIGNE, HUME: PYRRHONIZERS***

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1. Brian Ribeiro's *Sextus, Montaigne, Hume: Pyrrhonizers* proposes an interesting conception of Pyrrhonism as a whole, both from a historical point of view, by analyzing and approaching the texts of those three important philosophers, and from a philosophical point of view, trying to extract from these analyses some general ideas that allow us to understand Pyrrhonism as a philosophy.<sup>1</sup> One of these ideas, perhaps the most important, is prominently formulated in the "Introduction" and concerns the limits of rationality: from Sextus to Hume, passing through Montaigne, we can see a growing perception that the self-control and the cognitive capacity of reason are much more restricted than many might imagine (p. 4-5). In Ribeiro's terms, if it is right to conclude that there are "forces within us that are not reason-governed", then two philosophical questions arise from this conclusion. First, "what lessons can this teach us about our seemingly natural aspirations to cognitive self-mastery?" Next, "If Pyrrhonizing inquiry reveals that human life is far from being neatly reason-governed, is a good life still possible for us?" (p. 5).

Here we can see the main purpose of the book: to think about the relevance of traditional Pyrrhonism to two philosophical themes of undeniable relevance. In the first case, it is "epistemic akrasia"—"the case of believing contrary to your own considered judgment of what your reasons require you to believe" (p. 11). In the second case, once the existence of this type of akrasia is proved<sup>2</sup>, the traditional theme of the possibility of a practice consistent with skepticism is reinstated, a practice that, now recognizing such an irrational element, is capable of presenting itself as morally relevant and worthy of choice. Thus, the aim of the book is to understand "not simply what Pyrrhonizing skepticism is, but why Pyrrhonizing skepticism *matters*" (p. 7).

I cannot analyze all this in detail, but I register that Ribeiro proposes as a philosophically relevant result of his incursion into the Pyrrhonism of the three philosophers the thesis that this philosophy, as a privileged case of "open-minded inquiry" (p. 148), has a special ability to make us acquire an important intellectual virtue: "modesty/humility", fighting the temptations of "arrogance and self-assurance" (p. 147). And that makes Pyrrhonism a philosophy that still has a lot to teach us.

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<sup>1</sup> I thank Plínio Smith for correcting my first version in English of this text.

<sup>2</sup> I do not intend here to examine Ribeiro's arguments in this regard. In general terms, the argument is simple: if I recognize that I am not able to rationally refute an argument proposed by the skeptic regarding any belief – e. g., that I have two hands - and yet I continue to hold such a belief, so I accept that it is not grounded in reason and concede that there is a case of "epistemic *akrasia*" there. Therefore, such *akrasia* is real (cf. p. 14). For a more robust defense of his thesis, cf. p. 15 and 16, especially n. 14.

It is important to highlight that this book by Ribeiro is a remarkable case of a successful alliance between attentive interpretation of texts and philosophical reflection. It is undeniable that ancient Pyrrhonism and skepticism in general remain philosophically instigating (just remember that there are several contemporary thinkers who consider themselves Pyrrhonian skeptics) and that the reading of authors such as Sextus, Montaigne and Hume, who today appear to us as classics, challenges us to face problems that remain current. I believe that Ribeiro offers us a good example of how we still need to philosophize with our eyes on the skeptical challenges posed by these thinkers, and this presence of the skeptical challenge is formulated in a clear and polished way: "Radical skepticism challenges our very self-conception as epistemic agents" (p. 18).

If I understand Ribeiro's general argument, I consider it correct to say that he proposes a kind of evolutionary line, that is, this argument develops as it finds, in Montaigne compared to Sextus, and in Hume compared to Sextus and Montaigne, the theses that will allow him to formulate his general conclusions, which authorize him to formulate a unified "Pyrrhonism". It does not seem to me to be a mistake to attribute to Ribeiro's general argument the intention of tracing such an evolutionary line, in the sense of a continuity between the three philosophers that can and should be seen as a philosophical improvement of Pyrrhonism, as the following statement makes evident: "I will begin with Sextus, by attempting to clarify the basic features of Pyrrhonism that concern me... I will then expand outward (or forward in time) to show how the apparently non-standard versions of Pyrrhonism found in Montaigne and Hume nonetheless fit the standard model in important respects and indeed offer what many might see the improvements over Sextus' more austere version" (p. 20).

I should clarify that I do not mean to suggest that this strategy should be criticized. Indeed, when we turn to past philosophies in order to assess their possible contribution to current philosophy, it is perfectly reasonable and acceptable that they are seen in continuity and that this continuity qualifies as some kind of evolution or improvement of a single position. Many philosophers have adopted and still adopt this strategy which, from a philosophical point of view, seems to me legitimate. My point here is another one. As I said at the beginning, what Ribeiro does in his book consists of an alliance between understanding the thinking of the three philosophers and a philosophical reflection of his own. This objective naturally leads him to offer an interpretation of each of the philosophers separately, establishing their own positions and noting how far they have gone in their respective positions and in the ideas that he will consider as belonging to the "Pyrrhonism" that he extracts from this path. Therefore, the specific analysis of each philosopher, recognizing differences between them, seeks at the same time to find their similarities and, finally, their unity. And this unity ends up introducing, perhaps inevitably, that evolutionary line I mentioned. It happens, however, that from the point of view of the interpretation of each of the philosophers, this objective of finding continuity, evolution and unity can lead to a price to be paid.

I am referring to the fact that an evolutionary line can hardly avoid the risk of adopting a retrospective view when establishing the relationship between the philosophers examined. I think Ribeiro is fully aware of this when he talks about "improvements". After all, he is thinking about his subject as a historian of philosophy and as a philosopher, and this position leads to risks like this one. I think that the awareness of his so-to-speak amphibious objective explains why he sometimes declares that his interpretations should be viewed with caution and that

they may not be definitive<sup>3</sup>. But it seems to me that that retrospective view can produce some problematic consequences for understanding these philosophies, particularly, of course, with regard to Sextus Empiricus, because it seems to me evident that that the evolutionary and retrospective line, in some important respects, transforms Hume's philosophy at the most developed moment of the journey and Montaigne's philosophy in an intermediate step. To repeat, I don't see a problem to be solved in this idea and that's why I don't think it's the case to try to find in Ribeiro's general argument some kind of *petitio principii*. I only think that when we adopt the strategy of finding a similar content in earlier thinkers that will be taken up and improved by later thinkers, we run the risk – from the point of view of the historian and the interpreter—of projecting into an older philosophy something that we will clearly find only in more recent philosophy. Here, I will try to show that this may have occurred in the case of Sextus Empiricus, at least with respect to some important topics for Ribeiro's general argument.

2. The theme I am interested in commenting here is surely one of the most important for interpreters of sextan Pyrrhonism. I am referring to the problem of the scope of suspension of judgment and its consequences for determining the set of beliefs available to the Pyrrhonian skeptic and the kind of beliefs he can hold without abandoning his position. Anyone familiar with the literature produced on Sextus is certainly well acquainted with the dispute between defenders of a “rustic” skepticism, according to which suspension of judgment reaches all possible beliefs of the Pyrrhonist, including common beliefs of everyday life, and defenders of an “urban” skepticism, according to which the Pyrrhonist's suspension of judgment is directed only to beliefs that are based on philosophical and scientific theses, preserving the common beliefs that the skeptic can hold in a non-philosophical or non-scientific way<sup>4</sup>.

Ribeiro's central argument, according to which skeptical doubts reach any beliefs, but many of these beliefs are preserved and guaranteed by psychological and irrational factors (here, in my view, Hume's importance is perceived), naturally leads him to declare himself a defender of the rustic position, and he does so at the beginning (cf. p. 20, n. 4) and later develops his position (cf. p. 49 et seq.). Indeed, it seems to me that his position fits the rustic rather than the urban position better, but I'm not sure it's possible to simply see it as an undisputed case of rustic interpretation.

In fact, the distinction between the two positions is not as simple as it might at first appear in my earlier brief allusion to it. For the rustic interpreter, suspension of judgment reaches all beliefs. But for the urban interpreter, in a sense, this also seems correct, since this interpretation is characterized by the way in which beliefs should be understood and not necessarily in their content, something that can also be affirmed from the rustic interpretation. In the rustic interpretation, all propositions can be treated from two points of view: as records of reality or as records of how things appear<sup>5</sup> and that means that anything can be considered in these two ways<sup>6</sup>. Suspension of judgment about all things concerns the first point of view, but not the second, and about the second it is not a question of true or false,

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<sup>3</sup> I think it is fair to say that the intellectual virtue of modesty, which his conclusion will highlight as an important contribution of Pyrrhonism, is practiced by him throughout his book.

<sup>4</sup> It is not the place here to analyze these two positions in detail, since this would lead me too far away. I refer only to the main texts and interpreters of the debate, which still attracts many scholars: Barnes (1982), inspired by Galen, proposes the two denominations. Burnyeat (1983, 1984) is seen as the main representative of rustic interpretation, while Frede (1987) develops the urban position.

<sup>5</sup> Burnyeat (1983), p. 121-2.

<sup>6</sup> Burnyeat (1983), p. 128.

which allows the skeptic to propose a criterion of action. According to this criterion, when the skeptic assents to what appears to him, he only recognizes that he is passively affected by an impression, without offering resistance<sup>7</sup>. An important consequence of this interpretation is that there is no place for an “epistemic reading” of assent to what appears<sup>8</sup>.

And it is precisely the defense of epistemic value for skeptical beliefs that characterizes urban interpretation. For this interpreter, the skeptic, when giving assent in certain cases, has a type of knowledge, in the strong sense in which something is said to be the case<sup>9</sup>, as could be observed in the instigating passage of PH 1.13, which distinguishes two types of belief and restricts dogmatic belief to the sphere of science<sup>10</sup>, and in several passages such as PH 1.215, which qualify suspension of judgment on anything “insofar as it is a matter of reason (*logos*)”<sup>11</sup>. From this it follows that the skeptic does not have beliefs “about how things *really* are”, but has beliefs “about how things are—namely, to the extent that it seems to be the case that things are so or so”<sup>12</sup>. With this, it becomes perfectly possible for the skeptic to hold “his ordinary beliefs” and not treat them as if they were in conflict with reason, since reason always deals with theories, but he will not see them as mere appearance either<sup>13</sup>. However, it should not be concluded from this that the skeptic, for the urban interpreter, becomes a kind of common man, a “man on the street”, since all questions or beliefs can be treated from the point of view of *logos*, dogmatically, thus becoming non-evident, because it will lead to a theoretical answer, and can also be treated as simply being the case. The difference, here too, is not especially dependent on the contents of belief, but on the attitude of those who hold them<sup>14</sup>. The skeptic, therefore, does not identify with the man on the street, who seems to have dogmatic beliefs in morals and does not understand, as he does, that things could be different from what they are<sup>15</sup>. However, he will be able to hold a set of strong epistemic beliefs and see them as outside the field of his investigation.

This general and schematic presentation of the two interpretations seems to me to be sufficient at least to establish what is different and similar between them. For the rustic, as the skeptic suspends his judgment about everything, it remains for him to follow what appears to him, without any claim to knowledge, while for the urban, the skeptic can suspend his judgment about anything, but he can also claim to know anything (or at least many things) in an epistemically significant sense, without being dogmatic. In both interpretations, the skeptic does not divide the possible contents of belief into two subsets, separating one subset and preserving it from suspension of judgment, which concerns only the other. Even the urban skeptic, as we have seen, cannot present himself as an uncompromising advocate of common truths without looking critically at them. In the case of the rustic interpretation, practical life would be conducted, at least in principle, without the need of a strong epistemic belief, while in the case of the urban interpretation the skeptic's behavior in his practical life would be based on strong beliefs, even if

<sup>7</sup> Burnyeat (1983), p. 130-1.

<sup>8</sup> Burnyeat (1983), p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> Frede (1987a), p. 180.

<sup>10</sup> “When we say that Skeptics do not hold beliefs, we do not take ‘belief’ in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that belief is acquiescing in something... Rather, we say that they do not hold beliefs in the sense in which some say that belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences (*ton kata tas epistemas zetoumenon*); for Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything unclear”.

<sup>11</sup> Frede (1987a), p. 187-8.

<sup>12</sup> Frede (1987a), p. 186, 192-3.

<sup>13</sup> Frede (1987a), p. 191-2.

<sup>14</sup> Frede (1987a), p. 195.

<sup>15</sup> Frede (1987a), p. 198.

devoid of dogmatism, because disconnected from theories, and aware that things could be otherwise. In this sense, I believe it is reasonable to conclude that the urban interpretation, although not equivalent to it, is closer to a defense of adherence to basic truths of human life that remains immune to skeptical doubts, than would be the case in the rustic interpretation, whose adherence to life would always be controlled by the limitations imposed by the point of view strictly based on appearances.

If I am correct in my analysis so far, I believe it is possible to raise some suspicion about the meaning of Ribeiro's adoption of the rustic interpretation and it seems to me that this is precisely due to his Humean-inspired approach to Sextus to which I referred above. Perhaps the presence of this Humean reading of Sextus produces some problematic but interesting consequences for the now traditional "rustic versus urban" dilemma regarding ancient Pyrrhonism. Perhaps Hume ends up shuffling the cards a bit in this game. Perhaps Ribeiro's argument about epistemic akrasia and the strength of the irrational elements of our beliefs puts him in the position of someone who needs to keep his feet in two different canoes in order to navigate<sup>16</sup>.

Let us observe a formulation of the effects of epistemic akrasia:

the beliefs problematized by some radically skeptical argument may persist *even when we think those beliefs are not supported by the reasons we have...* After all, if you were a self-controlled epistemic agent, then the embracing radical skepticism would result in your suspending judgment about the claims problematized by the radical skeptic's argument. But of course *this won't happen* (p. 17-8; Ribeiro's italics).

In this passage we can see that the adoption of the suspension of judgment that the skeptic proposes with his arguments encounters an obstacle in our ability to resist the demands of reason. Our ability to resist such demands, which makes us possessors of epistemic akrasia, seems to transport us to a Humean scenario: reason alone could lead us to an unwanted suspension of our beliefs, but there is something in us that prevents it, precisely those irrational forces. The important point here is: what is the epistemic status of those beliefs that I cannot and do not want to abandon?

In the rustic interpretation, as we have seen, there could not be beliefs about the truth or falsity of the contents that appear to us—there could not be epistemic beliefs on those contents. In fact, according to this interpretation, it seems difficult to imagine a confrontation between beliefs based on reason and irrational beliefs, because the skeptic really suspends judgment about the truth or falsity of these beliefs and only then realizes that he can hold something similar to a belief from the point of view of appearances, which would be devoid of epistemic status and would be mere recognition of the phenomenon. In fact, in the canonical rustic interpretation, it is not a case of speaking of beliefs based on appearances, but of suspension of all belief (epistemic by definition). According to the urban interpretation, on the contrary, one can speak of epistemic beliefs, about something that is the case. Although this interpretation does not eliminate the possibility that the skeptic suspends judgment on his ordinary beliefs, he sustains them not as a kind of last resort for his practical life, as a kind of residue, but with the conviction

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<sup>16</sup> It seems to me that Ribeiro has always been prudent in associating his central theses with Sextus and that he is aware that Hume cannot be found in Sextus, but even so, it is worth asking whether his Sextus was not, after all, at least in part, the product of his Humean approach, which seems to me undeniable.

proper to a belief about what is the case. Judging by Ribeiro's formulation, I am inclined to think that epistemic akrasia and its consequences can be deduced only if one accepts the urban notion of epistemic belief.

If the idea of a belief that stands fast in the face of a rational argument opposed to it—a belief that emerges, so to speak, unscathed from the scrutiny of reason and is found to be irrational but unshakable—does not come as much of a surprise when attributed to Hume and even to Montaigne, the same does not seem to me to be the case when it comes to Sextus. Or, if that is right, the price to pay will, in my view, be the abandonment of a full defense of the rustic interpretation. However, it is necessary to examine Ribeiro's argument on this point, because it touches on fundamental passages of Sextus.

A few pages after the passage I quoted (p. 23-5), we find an analysis of PH 1.23-4. In it, Sextus succinctly presents his proposal for a skeptical life that follows the phenomena: "guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise". He then briefly explains each of these items and concludes by stating: "And we say all this without holding any opinions (*adoxastos*)". Ribeiro claims that Sextus is not referring to contents that would have "excellent epistemic credentials" that would protect us from skeptical doubt, which removes from these contents an epistemic status, and in this Ribeiro remains, I believe, faithful to the rustic interpretation. However, in stating that "It's just a *fact* that some things aren't destabilized by skeptical interrogation", that "the probing skeptical inquiry has found something that *pushes back* maybe even irresistibly so" and that "this bedrock, this solid and unbudging resistance, *stands fast* in the face of the worst skepticism can do" (Ribeiro's italics), the analysis seems to me to sound more urban (although not completely) than rustic, because it is claimed that the phenomena, which serve the skeptic as a non-dogmatic criterion of action, somehow resist the doubt produced by skeptical arguments, even if this resistance is verified through skeptical investigation and as a consequence of it. In this sense, it is as if those contents, after being investigated, ceased to be subject to this investigation, something that does not seem to me so easily compatible with the rustic interpretation, but is, I think, more easily compatible with the urban interpretation.

This way of understanding PH 1.23-4 is clearly based on that Humean approach I spoke of. Following his analysis, Ribeiro symptomatically evokes the famous Humean statement from the *Inquiry of Human Understanding* 12: "Nature is always too strong for principle", as if Hume "were *correcting* the Pyrrhonist position" (p. 23; Ribeiro's italics). Here we can see what I called a retrospective point of view of the analysis, because Ribeiro then argues that the items present in PH 1.23-4 are something like a less developed version of fundamental Humean notions, such as nature and habit or custom. I don't deny that this similarity exists, I just wonder if it can be taken as the consequence of a rustic analysis, as Ribeiro's allegedly is.

Let's see. The idea of "nature's orientation" in Sextus seems very simple: it appears to me that I am capable of feeling and thinking, and I don't need dogmatic theses to justify actions based on what I see and think. About the "needs of affections", it appears to me that I feel hunger and thirst, and I don't need to dogmatically judge that this is bad, just as I don't need to dogmatically judge that satisfying hunger and thirst is good to act based on affections. I can follow the traditions, laws and customs that manifest themselves to me as appearances, without having to defend any dogmatic theory that supports my choices, and I can even carry out certain technical activities, without having to justify them with some dogmatic theory. But why all these activities and contents of belief—as Ribeiro

rightly observes, in a rustic way, to speak of belief here is only referring to a passive adoption of something (cf. PH 1.230)—should lead to conclude that the skeptic restricts suspension of judgment to beliefs and propositions that are outside this “bedrock”?

I agree with Ribeiro that it is possible and even necessary to develop ideas about the nature and necessity of affections, in addition to the examples given in Sextus’ text, as it would not really be possible to elaborate the notion of a skeptical life with such insufficient elements. Customs, feelings, and natural inclinations can and should be a part of the skeptic’s life. However, it does not seem to me that this development can include the idea presented in that statement by Hume about the force of nature. To this thinker, “nature” is a much stronger and more operative concept. Nature prevents skeptical arguments from leading us to disbelief in fundamental matters of human practice and life. Nature preserves us and saves us from the evils of excessive Pyrrhonism. Whether in the stronger and more dramatic version of the conclusion of the first book of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, or in a perhaps more attenuated version like the one in the last section of the *Inquiry of Human Understanding*, it seems to me that the concept of nature, unlike what happens in Sextus, is thought of as a kind of response to the rational force of skeptical arguments, a response that, in certain cases—those that ultimately involve the very survival of the species—protects us and our reason from destruction. In Hume, therefore, it is absolutely clear that skepticism has the consequence for us of discovering the power, strength, and benefits of nature. In Sextus, however, to speak of nature is to refer to something that, in some way, forms part of a kind of world of phenomena, from a point of view of appearances, which only becomes comprehensible because we suspend judgment about everything (this seems to me to be clear in the rustic interpretation). Only in this way, it seems to me, can we understand that the Pyrrhonist can say that he accepts that honey is sweet because it appears to him that way, but that he suspends judgment about honey being sweet by nature (PH I 19–20). In Sextus, nature and skeptical argument do not conflict with each other, as in a clash in which one of them must win. Nature is just one more item in the world of phenomena that the skeptic begins to perceive when suspending judgment on the dogmatic discourses that intend to explain this world.

Ribeiro’s argument goes on to propose that those elements present in our lives and in the life of the skeptic—natural, psychological and cultural forces—, “can give our lives a certain rigidity. At least overall and after sufficient time has passed, these forces ossify certain features of our lives and make those features relatively or perhaps completely impenetrable to rational meddlings” (p. 24). Thus, certain contents of belief will possibly no longer be the objects of skeptical investigation, due to the force of nature and custom. Although Ribeiro states that “the solicitations of nature and custom are merely ‘gone along with’ by the skeptic in the passive sense of ‘not resisting but simply following’ – ‘as a boy is said to go along with his chaperon’ – in the sense of simply yielding without adherence (PH 1.230)” (p. 24), maintaining the rustic interpretation, the conclusion that “what emerges from all this is Sextus’ picture of both the extent of skeptical doubt and the contours of that-which-resists-doubt” (p. 24) brings him closer to the urban interpretation, if I understand it correctly, because it is in the urban interpretation that the possibility of having, in a certain sense, this type of separation arises, as one can extract from a passage like PH 1.13.

I do not see how to reconcile the typical idea of the rustic interpretation that “the skeptic has no commitments in any strong sense, and even with respect to his ‘guiding forces’, his attachment is perhaps almost purely passive” (p. 24) with the approximation with Hume and his notions of nature and custom, which, though not

explained in strictly rational terms, introduce a degree of belief and certainty which cannot be reduced to mere passive recognition<sup>17</sup>. Hume does not think that every time I have a belief that is not grounded in rational processes—this is the case in all matters of fact—I am aware that this belief is guaranteed by nature against skeptical arguments. When I have such a belief, I live it as a certainty *tout court*. The idea that the skeptic might fail to investigate the contents of his bedrock, although not categorically stated in the urban interpretation, is more compatible with it than with the rustic interpretation, which correctly highlights passages such as PH 1.165, where Sextus says that *diaphonia*, the disagreement that leads to suspension of judgment, encompasses both philosophical theses and common beliefs<sup>18</sup>.

From this point of view, the skeptic can argue for suspension of judgment regarding concepts directly present in ordinary life, such as movement, including life in his investigation (*ho bios*: the expression surely refers to something like common sense), that “follows phenomena (*tois phainomenois*)”, as part of the dogmatic positions that need to be investigated, because this common sense position, which affirms the reality of movement, is in agreement with most philosophers, such as Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus and Epicurus, with only the Eleatics Parmenides and Melisso defending their unreality, while the skeptic, taking into account phenomena and philosophical argument, suspends judgment (AM 10.45-9). This procedure is also found in PH 3, which brings together as defenders of the reality of the movement “common sense (*ho bios*) and some of the philosophers (*tines ton philosophon*)”, while the skeptic’s position, based on the arguments of both sides, will be to conclude that the movement is not more real than unreal<sup>19</sup>.

It is true that Ribeiro did not propose that the skeptic does not investigate basic notions of life, but he does argue that, at some point in his trajectory, basic beliefs such as these—I suppose they include, for example, the reality of movement, time and place—solidify and cease to be investigated. But this seems to me to overlook a central aspect of Pyrrhonism: its therapeutic vocation, which forces it to argue whenever necessary against any possible dogmatic thesis. The life of a Pyrrhonist, for Sextus, includes in the foreground a dialectical activity with no time to finish. We must remember the well-known passage from the last chapter of PH, which describes the Pyrrhonist as someone who wants to cure, through *logos*, the

<sup>17</sup> I will not analyze the Humean concept of belief here. I only say that the fact that beliefs, for Hume, do not result from a demonstrative and therefore rational process, but are feelings produced by a strong conception of an idea, does not seem to me sufficient to see them only as passive recognitions, as claims the rustic interpretation. The kind of certainty that, for Hume, beliefs produce in the mind seems to me, in this sense, to show much more affinity with the idea of the urban interpretation that we believe that something “is the case”, without believing that it is “really so”.

<sup>18</sup> “According to the mode deriving from dispute, we find that undecidable dissension about the matter proposed has come about both in ordinary live (*para te toi bioi*) and among philosophers (*kai para tois philosophois*)”.

<sup>19</sup> In PH 3.136, the reality of time is also affirmed from the point of view of phenomena (*hoson epi tois phainomenois*), although this position is not identified with the *bios*. This does not seem to me to prevent from approaching the passage of AM 10. In PH 3.119-20, regarding the concept of place (*topos*), *bios* is also not mentioned as a defender of its reality, but we read that those who defend it resort to “evidence” (*enargeia*). It is true that the use of this term can be interpreted as referring to a Stoic concept, and therefore to a Stoic argument, but it could also have been used, at least partially, as a way of expressing common certainties. This seems to me suggested by the first argument mentioned by Sextus: “he sees (*horon*) the parts of place—right and left, up and down, in front and behind—when he is in different places at different times, when he observes (*blepon*) that where my teacher used to talk there I now talk, and when he apprehends that the place of things light by nature is different from the place of things heavy by nature”.



dogmatist<sup>20</sup>. And the skeptic is fully aware that his fight against the dogmatic disease will only end when there are no more dogmatists—and he must also expect that that day will hardly come... And it is always necessary to keep in mind that this therapeutic dialectic is not concerned with producing an argument that embraces every possible belief (a much more influential idea in modern skepticism), but rather to present arguments opposed to the dogmatic arguments of his interlocutor. This activity must occupy a good part of the life of a Pyrrhonist, who is therefore preparing to present arguments, for example, against the reality of movement, time and place, as we have seen. Thus, he has a phenomenal adherence, a belief in a weak sense, to the reality of the movement, time and place, which in his everyday actions he certainly does not question, but he knows that he can face philosophical positions, but also non-philosophical ones—*bios*, the life of most human beings, sees in the phenomena that show movement, time and place a reason or evidence to assert its reality as much as philosophers do, without, however, arguing in favor of it. There would, therefore, be a kind of naive realism in *bios*, which the skeptic cannot but treat as a form, albeit perhaps more modest, of dogmatism. This seems to me enough to take a more cautious stance on the role played by irrational forces in the case of Sextus<sup>21</sup>.

The Humean reading of Sextus seems to me once again clearly perceptible in the following statement: “Sextus claims that when we exercise the skeptical ability—when we Pyrrhonize, as I have put it—we will in fact come to suspend judgment quite generally, and we are rescued from the fate of *apraxia* only by the elements of the four-fold regimen (PH 1.23–24)” (p. 49). I do not see in Sextus’ passage the Humean idea of a danger that we must be saved or redeemed. In Ribeiro’s argument, the adoption of the rustic interpretation is associated with the thesis that in Sextus only natural, psychological and irrational forces provide a defense shield against skeptical arguments. The Pyrrhonist, therefore, would extend his doubt to all beliefs—a rustic position—but those that are imposed on him thanks to those forces would be preserved from this rationally devastating doubt. That sounds more like Hume to me than Sextus.

3. As I said at the beginning of these comments, Ribeiro’s book offers us an instigating philosophical proposal for understanding and evaluating the benefits of Pyrrhonism for our current reflection, reviewing, with rigor and competence, the thinking of three important representatives of this philosophy (Ribeiro is rightfully cautious in the case of Hume). I have only tried here to show how the development of his general argument can be seen from the point of view of a traditional reading topic of Sextus Empiricus. In closing, let me try just one more time to formulate my point with some clarity. I believe that Ribeiro’s analysis of Sextus works with an important temporal distinction within the Pyrrhonist’s trajectory: at first, the

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<sup>20</sup> “Sceptics are philanthropic and wish to cure by argument, as far as they can, the conceit and rashness of the Dogmatists” (PH 3.280).

<sup>21</sup> Although my aim here is to suggest that Ribeiro’s central thesis is not entirely in agreement with the rustic interpretation, I do not propose to present rustic interpretation as superior or inferior to the urban interpretation. I am trying to show that the rustic interpretation has a point in its favor here, because the Pyrrhonist seems to include all philosophical beliefs or theses in the scope of his dialectic, including common sense truths. But I have to remark that I don’t think this necessarily leads me to adopt the position that a skeptical life is impossible, as is the case with Burnyeat’s influential article cited here (1983). I believe there are good reasons to reject the idea of “detachment from oneself” that underlies his argument, as I think Smith has shown (1996; 2022, chapter 12). It seems to me that Ribeiro also thinks that it is possible to defend a rustic interpretation and the possibility of a skeptical life (cf. p. 51 and n. 5, p. 52). And while I cannot address this issue here, I also do not agree with interpretations that conclude that the skeptic’s life would inevitably be opaque and devoid of emotions and feelings, as it seems to me to be the case, for example, in Nussbaum (1991) and Striker (1996).

Pyrrhonist investigates and doubts everything, looking at all theses and beliefs from an epistemic point of view. He understands that any proposition or belief about reality must be submitted to argumentation, and so one is led to suspension of judgment. Afterwards, certain beliefs, as a matter of simple passive recognition, impose themselves and gain consistency in his life, configuring it, shaping it, so that he stops investigating them and doubting them, because he discovered that there are natural, psychological forces and cultural factors that make them immune to doubt. I tried to show that, if on the one hand that beginning is typically rustic, on the other hand this end is more urban. And that can be seen as a problem to his interpretation, though not necessarily.

I'm not sure that this possible problem that I thought I found—if I didn't misunderstand Ribeiro's point—has any really important consequences for his philosophical proposal. Perhaps it is only relevant to an analysis of Sextus' thought. From the restricted point of view of an interpreter of Sextus, it seems reasonable to me to conclude that, when we introduce Hume into the already traditional debate between rustics and urbans, something interesting occurs and perhaps leads us to relativize the very debate. The possibility of elaborating an acceptable and coherent portrait of a Pyrrhonist that brings together rustic and urban aspects at the same time maybe shows us an instigating conclusion—that this debate should not be seen as exhaustive of the possible positions on the theme of suspension, doubt and belief. In this sense, it seems to me that Ribeiro does not necessarily need to assume his affiliation to the rustic interpretation in developing his argument, nor does he need to try to solve a dilemma that, after all, does not exist or is of little relevance, if, as I said, Hume's presence really shuffles the cards in the game. In this case, Ribeiro can navigate with one foot in each canoe.

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