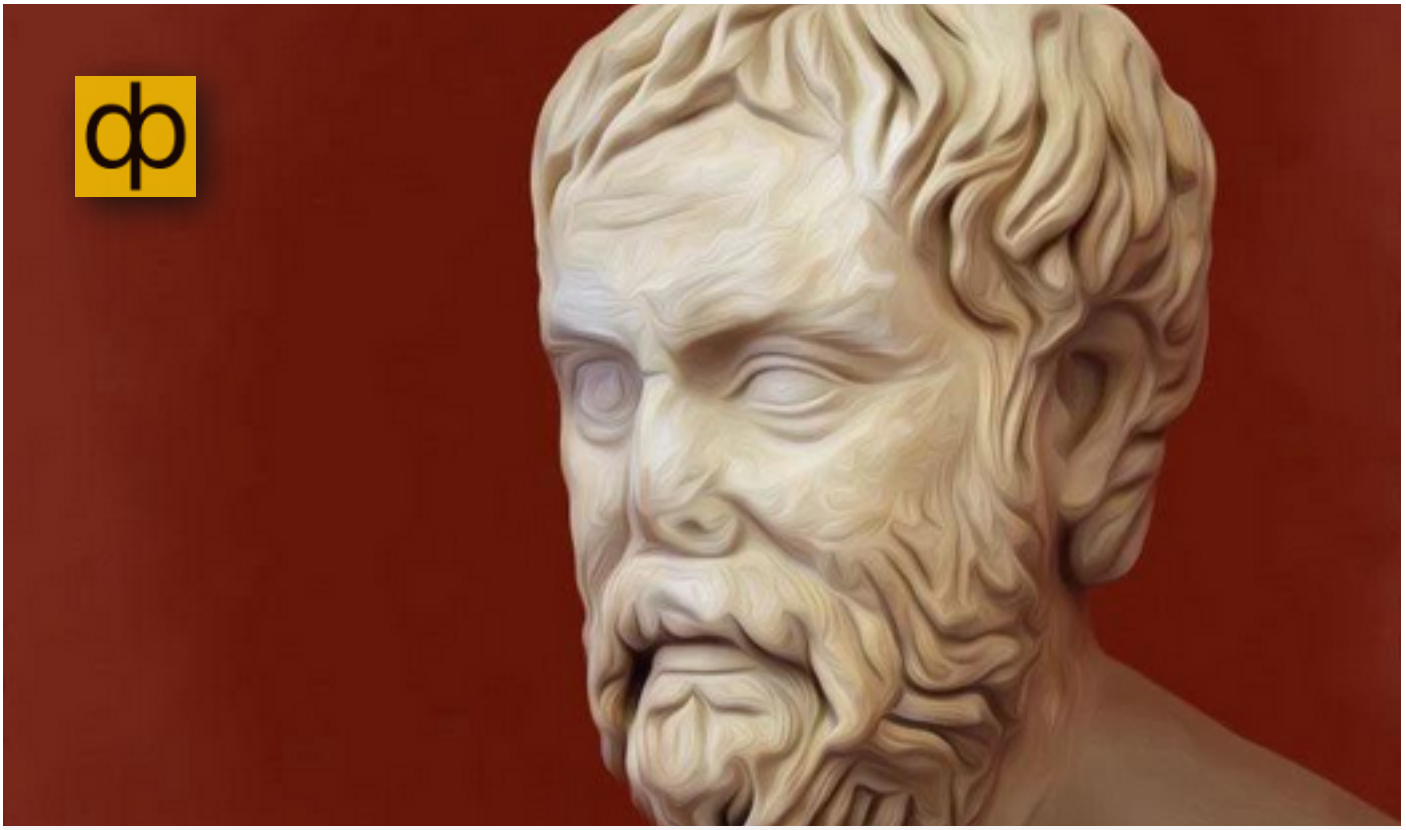

Pyrrhonism: Some Clarifications

A reply to Stephen Leach

By Andrei Mirovan

June 7, 2022 - 21 minutes read - 4343 words

This letter is a reply to:
Stephen Leach: In Praise of Pyrrhonian Scepticism

Radical scepticism has a good claim to be both the longest lasting tradition in philosophy and the consistently least popular. There's a lot to be said for it.

It is with genuine pleasure that I've discovered Dr. Stephen Leach's recent article, "In Praise of Pyrrhonian Scepticism", published on Daily Philosophy.

Compared to other Hellenistic schools of thought, like Stoicism and Epicureanism, Pyrrhonism was systematically neglected throughout the history of Western philosophy, and, when still taken into account, there is the everlasting temptation to conflate it with its rival, Late Academic scepticism or, more recently, with modern, Cartesian scepticism. This is regrettable, given the extremely subtle and valuable resources Pyrrhonism has to offer, both as a dialectical tool, and (perhaps even more importantly) as a philosophy of life.

Nevertheless, the last couple of decades witnessed a remarkable surge of scholarly interest both in ancient scepticism as a whole, and in Pyrrhonism, more specifically; exegetical works on the Pyrrhonian thinking continue to appear each year, and several contemporary professional philosophers – both in the United States (Robert J. Fogelin, Benson Mates), as well as in Latin America (Diego Machuca, Plínio Junqueira Smith) – explicitly identify themselves as (Neo-)Pyrrhonians. It is, therefore, commendable that Dr. Leach extends this recuperatory effort. It is even more commendable that his approach is informed by the benefits of comparative philosophy: the author helpfully discusses Pyrrhonism alongside Daoism, and he even mentions Buddhism at some point.

But no matter how meritorious an initiative, Dr. Leach's short essay contains, unfortunately, some doubtable claims and arguments. They fall into three broad categories:

- Those concerning Pyrrho and Pyrrhonism;
- Those regarding the relation between Pyrrhonism and ancient Chinese thought (namely, Daoism);
- And those referring to the benefits of Pyrrhonism.

In each case, I shall provide a point-by-point discussion, quoting the relevant assertions and explaining what do I find questionable about them. I shall also indicate an ambiguity of the key phrase "radical scepticism", as used by the author, and I shall conclude with a couple of considerations about Pyrrhonism as a "way of life".

On Pyrrho and Pyrrhonism

1. Although Pyrrho's works do not survive, Sextus [Empiricus] thought of himself as a disciple of Pyrrho.

The first part of this phrase is misleading. To wit, ancient authors – like Diogenes Laertius (*Lives*..., IX.11.102) and Aristocles of Messene (*via* Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praep. evang.*, xiv, 18.2) – unanimously report that Pyrrho did not put his philosophical teachings into writing. There were no philosophical works by him at all which could have had survived. (Granted: apparently, Pyrrho wrote a poem in praise of Alexander the Great, and this, indeed, was lost. But such a work is contextually irrelevant, because it was not philosophical.)

2. For this reason, I shall use the words 'Pyrrhonian scepticism' or 'radical scepticism' to apply to any philosophy that does not escape an infinite regress.

This linguistic convention seems strikingly inaccurate and confusing, insomuch as the article describes Pyrrhonism itself in terms which Pyrrhonians customarily direct as a charge at their philosophical opponents, the dogmatists. Sextus Empiricus, our only direct and extensive source on ancient Pyrrhonism, argues that any non-Pyrrhonian philosophy is plagued by infinite regress (this being only one among a couple of other possible impasses). Non-Pyrrhonians artificially and, ultimately, ineffectively try to avoid this danger by embracing dogma and, thus, by ceasing to enquire into the foundational presuppositions of their worldview. So, in order to rectify this misinterpretation, the quoted phrase should, I think, rather be reworded as:

"I shall use the words 'Pyrrhonian scepticism' or 'radical scepticism' to apply to any philosophy which argues that no *non*-Pyrrhonian or *dogmatic* position can really escape an infinite regress."

In contrast, at least according to Sextus's own view, Pyrrhonism itself does escape such regress, but it also escapes dogmatism, by suspending belief –

i.e., by withholding assent (attaining a state of *epoché*). Otherwise put: Sextan Pyrrhonism only draws attention to the infinite regress of dogmatic thinking, without falling itself into that trap. The article also states: "*Radical scepticism is this philosophical self-reflection carried to its logical end, or rather its logical inconclusion*." But, again, this is not entirely accurate. Granted, Sextan Pyrrhonians do try to draw the last consequences of the dogmatists' premises and commitments. However, this is done both in order to cure dogmatists of their perceived "arrogance and rashness", and in order to induce in Pyrrhonians themselves the suspension of judgment, hopefully conducive to unperturbedness (*ataraxia*). Hence, Sextan Pyrrhonians do not persist in the dogmatists' game: they play it only provisionally, for refutational and 'therapeutic' purposes only – but eventually, they aim to surpass it altogether, by their own strategy of mental abstention.

Further, depending on one's preferred classification criterion, Sextan Pyrrhonism might seem like a radical form of scepticism (as Dr. Leach's article proposes) or, on the contrary, as the most moderate or balanced one. On the one hand, it appears radical *by scope*: this is the case if by "radical", one understands a philosophy which applies to all beliefs – even to its own slogans (indeed, Sextan Pyrrhonism openly acknowledges itself to be self-referential, more precisely: self-eliminating). However, on the other hand, Sextan Pyrrhonism may, instead, appear moderate *by character*: from a different angle, this self-avowed application of Sextan Pyrrhonism even to itself has a tempering effect; so, if by "radical", one rather means "extremist", it could be argued that Sextan Pyrrhonism – by its self-limiting features and by its procedure of systematically trying to show that rival arguments have equal force – is the very opposite of extremism. (In contrast, "radical", in the sense of "extremist", would rather be the 'scepticism' of Late or New Academy, that of Carneades of Cyrene and his followers, a school of thought which Sextus Empiricus condemns as what might be called "negative dogmatism".)

3. The same infinite regress as preoccupied Pyrrho.

Is there evidence that such regress really preoccupied Pyrrho? Infinite regress is rather used as an objection to the possibility of epistemic justification in one of the five "modes" (*pente tropoi*) attributed to Agrippa the Sceptic, as recorded in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* by Sextus Empiricus. Therefore, I suppose one should replace in Dr. Leach's phrase the name of Pyrrho with those of later Pyrrhonians, Agrippa and Sextus.

4. Pyrrho and his followers **believed** that their stance was of practical benefit, providing a guide as to how to live. They **believed** that suspending judgement about any claim to certain knowledge was conducive to peace of mind, to ataraxia (detached serenity).

Even as Pyrrho himself is concerned, this description is problematic. In the famous Aristocles passage (transmitted to us by the aforementioned Eusebius), one of the few ancient testimonies on Pyrrho's conceptions, Pyrrho is reported to have said that we should remain ***adoxastoi*** – i.e., "without beliefs". This textual evidence directly contradicts the article's claims.

Now, what about "Pyrrho's followers"? It is not quite clear whether by this locution, Dr. Leach only means Pyrrho's direct disciples or also very distant heirs, like Sextus Empiricus. Nevertheless, we must distinguish Pyrrho's own views from Sextus's. We lack firsthand accounts of Pyrrho's teachings, because, as already pointed out, he did not convey his views through writing. But several contemporary scholars – amongst whom, perhaps most notably, Richard Bett – argue that, in the light of what we can gather from indirect sources, Pyrrho's conceptions appear to have been remarkably different from those of later self-invested adherents. Moreover, these modern interpreters suggest that Pyrrho might not even qualify as a sceptic in Sextus's sense, but (surprisingly) rather as a dogmatist. If so, the circumstance that much later thinkers, like Aenesidemus of Cnossos and Sextus Empiricus, adopted Pyrrho as a tutelary figure of their philosophical tradition could be seen more as an ideological manoeuvre than as a move firmly grounded in sufficient similarities.

Thus, even supposing that Pyrrho himself did hold some beliefs (but see again the above objection), it is very doubtful that much later sceptics of the Sextan type can be said to have had beliefs. A genuinely charitable reading should, at the very least, take into account that Sextus describes his brand of scepticism as inducing the suspension of belief – i.e., the withholding of assent – regarding 'non-evident' issues (like those fruitlessly debated for centuries both by the learned and by the lay). Sextan Pyrrhonian sceptics decide and act exclusively based on mere appearings, not beliefs.

Therefore, the article's assertion ought more cautiously be rephrased as:

"*It appeared* to Pyrrho and his followers that their stance was of practical benefit, providing a guide as to how to live. *It seemed* to them that suspending judgement about any claim to certain knowledge was conducive to peace of mind, to *ataraxia* (detached serenity)."

This issue aside, it is most debatable that the notion of "epistemic certainty" plays any role (even a negative one) in Pyrrho or Sextus. It could, indeed, be argued that it is anachronistic to present Pyrrhonism as reacting to the idea of "epistemic certainty": the latter is rather a modern concern, perhaps most prominently illustrated by Descartes, in the 17th century. (Of course, ancient sceptics – both Pyrrhonian and Academic – vigorously attacked the Stoic notion of *katalēpsis* or "apprehension". Could this latter construct be seen as an instance of the idea of "certain knowledge"? Up to a point, perhaps. But this would still invite the suspicion of a "retrospective illusion".)

5. Implicitly, Heidegger also answered the question of why [Pyrrho's] prescription was unconvincing. He argued that western philosophy (since the pre-Socratics) has, without justification, tended to assume that metaphysics and epistemology comprise the highest branches of the discipline. Pyrrho's prescription for ataraxia is a prime example of this.

Yes, Pyrrho was concerned with practice but, conforming to Heidegger's thesis, he tended to assume that taking the correct

> approach in epistemology would act as a starting point to clear away problems in the practical sphere. Herein lies his impracticality.

But what unequivocal textual evidence do we have that Pyrrho really exemplifies such an – allegedly, questionable – tendency? And what does it mean, in this context, "the 'correct' approach in epistemology"? Here is the Aristocles passage, for the reader to judge:

> Whoever wants to live well (to achieve eudaimonia) must consider these three questions: First, how are *pragmata* (things, affairs, topics) by nature? Secondly, what attitude should we adopt towards them? Thirdly, what will be the outcome for those who have this attitude?
>
> Pyrrho's answer is that: "As for *pragmata*, they are all *adiaphora* (undifferentiated), *astathmēta* (unstable, unbalanced, not measurable), and *anepikrita* (unjudged, unfixed, undecidable). Therefore, neither our sense-perceptions, nor our *doxai* (views, theories, beliefs) tell us the truth or lie; so we certainly should not rely on them. Rather, we should be *adoxastoi* (without beliefs), *aklineis* (uninclined toward this side or that), and *akradantoi* (unwavering in our refusal to choose), saying about every single one that it no more is than it is not or it both is and is not or it neither is nor is not." [translation by Christopher I. Beckwith, slightly revised]

Therefore, despite some scholarly interpretations referred to above (see point "4") and apparently echoed by the article, the case can be made that Pyrrho's main purpose is – so to say – 'psychotherapeutical', rather than epistemological: his main goal is *eudaimonia*, not truth. Moreover, Pyrrho's approach seems merely pragmatic: his suggested means for progressing toward the end of living well is practical utility, rather than epistemic correctness. Indeed, given the finding that "neither our sense-perceptions, nor our *doxai* (views, theories, beliefs) tell us the truth or lie," we appear to

have no reliable guide for epistemic correctness. But then, against the interpretation favored by Dr. Leach, it can hardly be concluded that Pyrrho was preoccupied at all to "take the correct approach in epistemology".

As for Pyrrho's supposed engagement with metaphysics, this is contentious, as well. Even if one would accept that Pyrrho did make some pronouncements about "the real nature of things," it can plausibly be argued that they were not offered for ontological speculation's own sake, but were rather subservient to Pyrrho's more pragmatic, therapeutical goal of nurturing a good, undisturbed life.

On the relation between Pyrrhonism and Eastern thinking

> In summary[,] the comparison of radical scepticism in Chinese and western philosophy suggests again that the impracticality of achieving ataraxia is not intrinsic to radical scepticism but rather is intrinsic to the impractical elevation of metaphysics and epistemology above all other branches of philosophy.

The article seems to contend that Zhuangzi's own brand of radical scepticism is practically superior to that of Pyrrho and Sextus, insomuch as, in contrast with the latter, the former does not privilege metaphysics and epistemology and, moreover, insomuch as it (allegedly) does not resort to the suspension of belief.

But here, Dr. Leach tacitly changes his initial objection. Thus, he previously denounced "the (alleged) impracticality of achieving *ataraxia* through epoché (i.e., through the suspension of belief)", as found in Pyrrhonism, rather than "the impracticality of achieving *ataraxia*" tout court, as he writes now. This is all the more so, given the finding that, at least according to some contemporary Western scholars of Daoism (Coutinho, de Bary, Kjellberg), even a thinker like Zhuangzi aims at something akin to the Pyrrhonian *ataraxia*. Hence, if one would accept this reading, the

difference between Pyrrhonism and Daoism is not that the former aims at *ataraxia* and the latter doesn't, but rather that the former aims at *ataraxia* through *epoché*, while the latter (at least according to the article) dispenses with *epoché*. Nevertheless, some experts even suggest that one can find in Zhuangzi an equivalent of *epoché*, as well.

Moreover, the article doesn't make justice to the intellectual relations between Greek Pyrrhonism and Indian Buddhism.

Thus, while it does provide a concise discussion of a parallelism with the Chinese Daoist thought of Zhuangzi, borrowing a quote from the latter, the author invokes Buddhism only in passing, without even briefly exemplifying the proposed similarities – grounded or not in real historical contacts – between the Pyrrhonian views and the Madhyamaka ("Middle Way") school of Buddhism, founded by Nāgārjuna.

And yet, in the last two decades, several book-length academic treatments of this topic (alongside diverse scholarly papers) have been published. Perhaps the most recent volume of this kind, which even the lay audience might find rewarding, is Adrian Kuzminski's *Pyrrhonian Buddhism: A Philosophical Reconstruction* (Oxford: Routledge, 2021). Without going into much detail, suffice it to say here that one of the main similarities between Pyrrhonism and Indian Buddhism of Nāgārjuna is the so-called "tetralemma" (*catuṣkoṭi* in Sanskrit) – a powerful argumentative device, meant to help one avoid any metaphysical commitment, by asserting about each definitive metaphysical claim or view that it is simultaneously true, not true, both, and neither.

(In fact, it would seem that, long before Nāgārjuna, the tetralemma was already in use within Indian philosophy, being the favorite dialectical instrument of an ascetic teacher like Sañjaya Belaṭṭhaputta, around the 6th century B.C.E. Apparently, it was also employed by his contemporary, the Buddha himself. Interestingly, however, the Buddhist tradition criticizes Sañjaya's agnostic perspective, while, at the same time, embracing – at least up to a point – a similar method.)

What is “radical scepticism”, after all?

At this stage, one is inclined to wonder what might even be meant by the key phrase, “radical scepticism”. As we have seen, early on in the article, “radical scepticism” appears to be identified with Pyrrhonism. But this is confusing on at least two grounds:

On the one hand, it should be recalled that, subsequently, the author extends the phrase “radical scepticism” also over Zhuangzi’s views. And the latter differ from the Pyrrhonian approach insomuch as, according to the article itself, they do not capitalize upon metaphysics and epistemology, and they do not imply the suspension of judgment. (As just mentioned, the implication that Zhuangzi deploys no equivalent of Pyrrhonian *epoché* is controversial. But for the argument’s sake, let us provisionally grant it.) In fact, the article even suggests that Zhuangzi’s own version of so-called “radical scepticism” is superior to that of Pyrrho, because it is, allegedly, much less impractical. But then, why is Dr. Leach’s essay even called “In praise of Pyrrhonian (!) scepticism”, if the author prefers Zhuangzi’s way over Pyrrho’s? Wouldn’t titles like “In praise of radical scepticism” or even “In praise of Daoist radical scepticism” have been more appropriate?

On the other hand, even in the Western philosophical tradition alone, Descartes’s much later scepticism – albeit merely methodological and, according to Richard Popkin, aimed at actually defeating Pyrrhonian scepticism – is, ironically, even more radical than Pyrrhonism. Why? Because it seems that ancient Pyrrhonians did not doubt the very existence of an objective, physical reality, whereas Descartes did (at least provisionally, as a mere “thought experiment” meant to secure some absolutely certain foundations for human knowledge). If so, then it’s once again misleading to imply that Sextan Pyrrhonism is *the* most radical form of scepticism ever conceived in the history of Western thought. (There is, however, an ironical turn both to Cartesian and to ancient Pyrrhonian scepticism: despite beginning with “doubting everything”, Descartes’s philosophy ends up by re-enforcing the religious _status quo _of his day: the faith in the Christian God; as for ancient Pyrrhonians, they were – by

and large – behavioral conformists: they were acting upon the laws and customs of their time and place, despite professing to be inwardly detached of the beliefs in which those social practices were rooted. Thus, more closely examined, the most iconic two types of so-called "radical scepticism" prove to have been quite socially and even intellectually conservative!)

On the benefits of "radical scepticism"

> *Having defended radical scepticism from the criticisms that it is an impediment to philosophical progress* [my italics – A.M.] and that it is ridiculously impractical, it should, more positively, be said that without any belief in philosophical progress, there is much interesting and useful work that the sceptic is well-equipped to do. For example, without baggage (without presuppositions), the sceptic may be well equipped to discover the presuppositions underlying both everyday judgements and other disciplines of inquiry. Indeed, without presuppositions, the sceptic is less likely than Kant to become entangled in debates about appearance and reality. But although this is useful work, as conducted by the sceptic, it is not an exercise that is progressive in an Enlightened sense – for the sceptic will have no reason to believe that in the future these presuppositions will not change.

However, the article has not actually defended what the author calls "radical scepticism" (i.e., Pyrrhonism, according to his initial stipulation) from the accusation that it is an obstacle to philosophical progress. It rather challenged the idea of "philosophical progress" altogether. This is even more obvious when, earlier in the text, we read:

> Yet, since radical scepticism still exists, as a live philosophical concern – there is no universally agreed method by which it can be vanquished, nor even a commonly agreed method –, it is perhaps time to call into question the notion that philosophy does progress (at least in the same manner of natural science).

Unfortunately, we are not told how "philosophical progress", if at all possible, might then look like.

Dr. Leach only acclaims Pyrrhonism for its (presumed) capacity to bestow benefits upon such diverse critics of metaphysics as Kant, Ayer, and Rorty – and the like. But, to say the least, it's not so clear what this means.

Kant's approach is epistemological, whereas the Pyrrhonian one is psychotherapeutical; so, it's not obvious how could Pyrrhonism have befitted Kant, as long as the latter would have been still doing what he was intent on doing; namely, dropping the discussion about "appearance" and "reality" would not have helped Kant's endeavor, but it would have rather changed the very project he was willing to pursue.

Further, Ayer could have hardly secured his position by resorting to Pyrrhonism, because – as already mentioned – Pyrrhonism is self-eliminating, not self-protective (as the article wrongly suggests).

Last but not least, the proposal that Rorty could have profited from incorporating Sextan Pyrrhonism into his philosophical approach remains foggy. (Dr. Leach also wrote a scholarly paper on this topic – "Pyrrhonian Scepticism and the Mirror of Nature", *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 27, 4, 2013, pp. 388-401 –, but the more in-depth discussion therein doesn't bring sufficient clarification, either.) Once again, we encounter the problematic idea that Pyrrhonism is – putatively – characterized by infinite regress. This aside, it's still hard to see how acknowledging such infinite regress would have helped Rorty's neo-pragmatism. (Parenthetically, it should also be noted that the author constructs a strawman when he implies that, according to Rorty, philosophy is dead as an autonomous discipline: in fact, Rorty was only attacking *traditional 'analytic'* philosophy, as pursued in the Anglophone world: namely, metaphysics and epistemology, which he wanted to replace with a hermeneutic or 'conversational' type of philosophy, influenced by the way philosophy is more frequently practiced in continental Europe.)

But even supposing that the article would have offered a persuasive plea for

the theoretical or scholarly benefits of Pyrrhonism, it seems to omit another crucial aspect: ancient Pyrrhonism – just as other Hellenistic philosophies, like Stoicism and Epicureanism – was primarily a practice. It had a psychotherapeutical orientation, concretized as a two-fold goal: that of achieving unperturbedness (*ataraxia*) as regards the 'non-evident' issues debated for centuries by the learned – issues which are a matter of belief and thus, avoidable –, and that of attaining the moderation of feeling (*metriopatheia*) as regards appearings or feelings like thirst or hunger – which are a matter of experience and thus, unavoidable, but controllable to some degree, by eschewing belief or dogma (to Sextus, these two terms seem to mean roughly the same).

So, can't ancient Sextan Pyrrhonism be revived also as a *practical* philosophy, helpful for 21st century people, just as it seemingly was for the ancients? I propose that the question can be answered in the affirmative. Especially in the U.S., there is a contemporary tendency of rediscovering diverse Hellenistic philosophies as *ways of life*. They are nowadays mined for self-help tips and techniques – "spiritual exercises" aimed at improving the mental condition of average persons. By far the most visible initiative of this sort is Modern Stoicism movement, with its prolongations in the realm of cognitive-behavioral therapies, but there are also several popular books and communities (both online and offline) devoted to living according to the principles of Epicureanism.

What is, however, the situation of ancient Pyrrhonism? Much more marginal, but not entirely desperate, let us hope.

To the best of my knowledge, the interested non-specialists currently have at their disposal only two recent bibliographical attempts at popularizing Pyrrhonism in English.

The first one is *Pyrrho's Way: The Ancient Greek Version of Buddhism* (Ottawa: Sumeru Press, 2020), by Douglas C. Bates. The other is *How to Keep an Open Mind: An Ancient Guide to Thinking Like a Skeptic* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2021), by Richard Bett.

Granted, neither is totally irreproachable: although a gifted translator of Sextus Empiricus and generally not devoid of skill as a commentator, Bett occasionally stumbles in this introductory presentation of Sextus' views: e.g., Bett misleadingly suggests it might be the case that, according to Sextus, Pyrrhonians suspend judgment on *all* topics, whereas Sextus himself actually generally writes (barring some confusing formulations to the contrary) that Pyrrhonians only suspend judgment on 'non-evident' topics – i.e., topics which are a matter of avoidable *dogmas* or *beliefs* and which are unproductively debated for ages by the learned, in contrast with what is 'evident', viz. the appearings themselves, "which are forced upon us" and thus, unavoidable.

As for Douglas C. Bates, the founder of the Modern Pyrrhonism movement, it could be argued that he is a bit too enthusiastic in drawing parallelisms between Pyrrhonism and Buddhism, to the point of not emphasizing enough their respective differences; besides, he delivers some engaging, but questionable speculations about Pyrrho's (alleged) sacerdotal status during Pyrrho's travel in India with Alexander the Great, as well as about Sextus Empiricus's real identity (whom Bates disputably equates with Sextus of Chaeronea, a relative of Plutarch and one of emperor Marcus Aurelius' philosophical tutors).

This notwithstanding, both books are useful for the general public – and, I would say, complementary. Namely, on the one hand, Bett's volume offers direct translations from Sextus' works, with the original Greek text included – an indispensable tool for becoming acquainted with Pyrrhonism from a firsthand source. On the other hand, Bates' book is valuable as a guide for Pyrrhonian *practice*, made accessible to a 21st century audience; it contains helpful comparisons between Pyrrhonism and a wide variety of philosophical and spiritual schools, ancient and modern, Western (Heraclitean, Democritean, Protagorean, Cyrenaic, Late Academic, postmodernist) and Eastern alike (Buddhism, including Zen, as well as Daoism); it also provides considerations on Pyrrhonism and science, some tips on the Pyrrhonian practice, and – perhaps most importantly – chapters on Pyrrhonian decision-making in general, as well as regards religion,

ethics, and politics.

Lay persons interested to find out about the topicality and relevance of Pyrrhonism as a "way of life", and even to see how they could apply Pyrrhonism to their own existence, as a path to emotional unperturbedness (*ataraxia*) and even to personal thriving (*eudaimonia*), or at least to intellectual flexibility and humbleness, might profit from considering these two books for further study.

See also:
Stephen Leach: A Reply to Andrei Mirovan

A response to this article.

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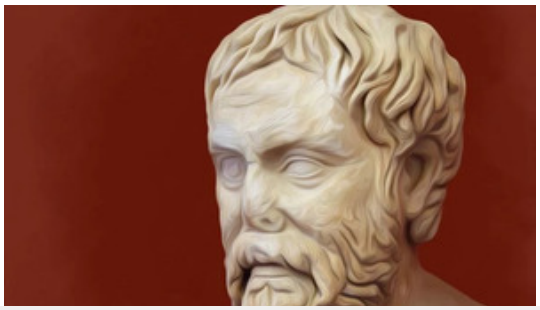

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