

## **The Elegance of Rage Quitting: Sextus Empiricus'**

### **Pyrrhonism and the Analogy of Apelles the Painter**

Sextus Empiricus provides the story of Apelles the painter as an analogy to help his audience better understand pyrrhonism, the skeptical program he supports. While the analogy translates some components of pyrrhonism into a lived situation, this also gives rise to further questions. This paper will analyze Sextus' analogy of Apelles the painter and evaluate how helpful it is in supporting the pyrrhonist program. From this, the concepts of suspension and quietude will be discussed more closely, with Ribeiro's essay *Is Pyrrhonism Psychologically Possible?* as a touchstone. It is the hope that through this investigation, Sextus' account of pyrrhonism and its surrounding concepts will be made more clear, and there may be an answer regarding how one should interpret Sextus' analogy.

For the sake of clarity and concision, the analogy of Apelles the painter will be provided in Sextus' own words:

Once, they say, when [Apelles] was painting a horse and wished to represent in the painting the horse's foam, he was so unsuccessful that he gave up the attempt and flung at the picture the sponge on which he used to wipe the paints off his brush, and the mark of the sponge produced the effect of a horse's foam (PH 1. 28 [find out what lines]).

Sextus would like to suggest that Apelles' act of suspending his attempt to paint the horse's foam is analogous to suspending judgement via pyrrhonism. The painting techniques/efforts Apelles unsuccessfully deployed are analogous to the dogmas that Sextus is averse to, namely Aristotelianism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, etc.. In suspending judgement and surrendering dogma (for Apelles, this is the act of ceasing to paint and throwing the sponge), the skeptic finds

quietude. Sextus makes it explicitly clear before presenting the analogy that an individual who does not pursue or reject something eagerly will not be perturbed (PH 1. 28).

Here one already encounters a point for multiple interpretations of the analogy. In the case of Apelles, Sextus argues that the suspension of judgement actually helped him complete the task at hand. In cases such as this, it becomes difficult to delineate between philosophical quietude and the calm satisfaction of having completed said task. It could also be the case that throwing the sponge was not representative of quietude but was in fact the culmination of Apelles' subscription to traditional methods and his experience of disappointment and frustration. If one follows this line of thinking, it becomes unclear whether or not the judgement suspension component of pyrrhonism is seen in the sponge throwing, the stopping of painting, neither, or both. When given a closer examination, it seems that the analogy of Apelles the painter may give rise to more questions than what Sextus originally intended.

Now that possible some interpretations have been addressed, alternate versions of the Apelles story will be explored in relation to Sextus' analogy. What would the situation look like had Apelles ceased painting and not thrown the sponge? It appears that the skeptic criterion of judgement suspension is met, but no action is taken that remedies the original issue. Perhaps the suspension of painting, regardless of throwing the sponge, would have led to a shift of perspective. It ought to be noted that quietude is not the same as resignation, and the ataraxia, or placidity that is sought after by pyrrhonists should not be confused with apraxia. Similarly one may wonder what would have happened had Apelles threw the sponge at the painting and ruined it instead of achieving a perfect result. If Apelles still found quietude by distancing himself from the task at hand, then the story would be in line with the skeptic program. If, however, Apelles

did not find quietude, perhaps this could still be a lesson for the skeptic program (though not an analogy): that to approach a task too eagerly can lead to frustration. Many of these concerns may be remedied if one holds accepts a broader scope for what constitutes a (good) analogy. More stringent observation will naturally find more discrepancies within an analogy, so it is critical that one uses a critical yet charitable eye when engaging with a text such as this.

The goal of Sextus' analogy is to support the pyrrhonist program which aims to help individuals achieve quietude via suspending judgement and relinquishing dogma. However, thinkers such as Brian Ribeiro challenge one of the core components of the program: quietude. Ribeiro argues that the pyrrhonian skeptic program is psychologically impossible. He presents a solid case against the psychological possibilities of academic skepticism, given that our cognitive architecture dictates that we operate much of the time via heuristics with a limited time/energy economy. To claim that pyrrhonian skepticism is psychologically impossible is a tougher sell, however. Sextus is in line with Ribeiro in acknowledging that the skeptic is troubled by "things unavoidable," specifically citing cold, hunger, etc. (PH 1. 29). One possible interpretation that could partially address Ribeiro's concern is to expand "things unavoidable" to encapsulate particular psychological maladies or discomforts. However, this leads to a further concern of where to draw the line between avoidable and unavoidable psychological distress.

Again, Ribeiro's argument hinges on the scope of the pyrrhonian skeptic program. In matters of theoretical questions or questions that approach the limits of what is empirically verifiable, it seems easier to suspend judgement. Daily judgements, questions, and actions in which judgements are suspended come under more fire, as evidenced by anecdotes from Diogenes Laertius. Ribeiro argues that epistemic doubt may be achieved through the pyrrhonist

program, but not psychological suspension. It could very well be the case that epistemic doubt in regards to judgement is sufficient for the skeptic program, seeing as deploying epistemic doubt can possibly alleviate psychological turmoil. One has to remember, though, that the end goal of skepticism is quietude, or ataraxia. The new concern is whether quietude can be achieved by merely casting epistemic doubts or whether it must be achieved psychologically. This returns to the issue mentioned prior of how closely one should expect an analogy or criterion to fit another object/action/event. Contemporary thinkers such as John McDowell adopt philosophical quietude which exists in a similar vein to the skeptic program, though his work is more closely aligned with an epistemic quietude as opposed to strictly psychological. Here we can demarcate between intellectual quietude and psychological quietude. It seems that the analogy of Apelles can operate under either interpretation; either the painting techniques used can represent the intellectual programs of other philosophers or the dogma/zeal with which these programs are held.

Sextus' analogy of the painter has been investigated to help determine how well it maps onto pyrrhonism. After this, pyrrhonism itself was evaluated from a critical perspective by Ribeiro. A concern not yet mentioned, however, is whether pyrrhonism is itself a form of dogmatism. Is the recommendation that one should suspend judgement on particular issues not itself dogmatic? According to Sextus, it is not dogmatic, as evidenced by his argument of the medicinal role of skepticism, which frames skepticism as a purgative technique used to dispel previously held dogmas. The medicinal model will not be explored in depth in this paper, but it is worth noting that thinkers such as Sextus even take their own program with a grain of salt, thus simultaneously loosening and reifying their position.

Ribeiro's strong reading of pyrrhonism opens the door to many issues which he effectively addresses, but the issue at hand is whether or not this strong reading is accurate or charitable to the pyrrhonist program. One last concern remains: whether or not achieving ataraxia before the suspension of judgement would short circuit pyrrhonism. If quietude is perceived as the end goal, then its achievement without deploying the tools of pyrrhonism could be of no concern to Sextus. Sextus could argue, however, that quietude is not possible to achieve without the suspension of judgement.

In exploring Sextus' analogy of Apelles the painter, one can gain valuable insights of quietude, suspension of judgement, and the pyrrhonist program in general. With this, however, more questions arose in attempts to map on specific instances of each concept on to the story of Apelles itself. Beyond the analogy, the viability of skeptical programs was evaluated with the help of Ribeiro's essay on whether or not pyrrhonism is psychologically possible. Lastly, the skeptic program was analyzed to see whether or not it can truly distinguish itself from the dogmas it seeks to escape. While multiple questions were raised, it seems that their answers are largely contingent on the intended scope and strength of the analogy. In adopting a weaker view of the story of Apelles, many objections can be accounted for. It is only when adhering to more strict criteria that problems may arise.

In the spirit of Sextus' program, it may be beneficial to not pursue the question too eagerly. Sextus himself would likely encourage a reader to not approach the analogy with a level of zeal comparable to that of those who subscribe to other philosophical programs.

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Pseudonym: My brain is Aikin from all this philosophy

Word Count: 1500

References:

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Brian Ribeiro- Is Pyrrhonism Psychologically Possible?