



## Practical scepticism of life. Theoretical scepticism of fiction in ancient skepticism<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** It is a natural fact that life, unlike judgments, cannot be suspended. We accept that we must decide in life, and that we move, or have impulses, towards certain things. Hence, we act in one way or another, drawing on and assigning a certain validity to impressions detected by our senses, while deeming others unreliable. This is what Sextus means when he states that the sceptic applies criteria not to distinguish the true from the false, but rather to deal with life. In this article, I contend that the differences between the different types of philosophies, and even scepticisms, occur more at the gnoseological level than at the practical one. Moreover, I argue that, in most cases, we do not act with established principles. Rather, we act with a certain “socialized” scepticism that we all draw upon, allowing ourselves to be convinced by the data that we have, in a relative way, accepting that the probable, plausible or reasonable in each situation determines whether we act in one way or another, with everything being shaped by what appears to us, by phenomena.

**Keywords:** scepticism; ethics; moral; Pyrrho; Sextus; Arcesilaus; Carneades.

### [es] Escepticismo práctico de la vida. El escepticismo teórico de ficción en el escepticismo antiguo

**Resumen.** Es un hecho natural que la vida no puede ser suspendida, al contrario de los juicios. Admitimos que tenemos que decidir en la vida, y que nos movemos o tenemos impulsos hacia las cosas. Por ello, actuamos de una manera o de otra, sirviéndonos y prestando cierta validez a impresiones de nuestros sentidos, frente a otras que no nos merecen confianza. Esto es lo que quiere decir Sexto, cuando advierte que el escéptico tiene un criterio no para distinguir lo verdadero de lo falso, sino para conducirse en la vida. En este artículo queremos defender que las diferencias entre los diversos tipos de filosofías, y hasta de escepticismos, se producen más en el plano gnoseológico que en el práctico. Es más, defendemos que, en la mayoría de las ocasiones, no actuamos con principios establecidos, actuamos con cierto escepticismo “socializado” que todos activamos, dejándonos convencer con los datos que tenemos, de manera relativa, asimilando que lo probable o lo plausible o lo razonable en cada situación decide que actuemos en una dirección u otra, y todo presidido por lo que se nos aparece, por el fenómeno.

**Palabras claves:** escepticismo; ética; moral; Pirrón; Sexto; Arcesilao; Carnéades.

**Sumario:** 1. Introduction; 2. The folly of radical scepticism. Pyrrho and exaggerations; 3. Another example: the judicious and sensible posture of academic scepticism; 4. Sextus Empiricus: following the imperatives of life without dogmatism; 5. A socialized scepticism; 6. Conclusion; 7. Bibliographic references.

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## 1. Introduction

The scepticism of our day is a *socialized scepticism*. As an attitude and as a method, it has seeped into the core of culture and into its modes of action and understanding; that is, it has become part of the environment. What is insistently called “post-truth” might be considered the communicative dimension of that post-factual vision, in which the true has gone from an object of understanding to an object of the will, and in which even verisimilitude is no longer an value. The new forms of affective attachment, the new modes of emotion, have displaced the sceptical disposition from knowledge to affection. And, if this has occurred, we find ourselves in a new situation in which the traditional social contract regarding the truth has been ruptured.<sup>3</sup>

Controversy aside, I am not going to deal here with the contemporary problem of whether or not skepticism or skeptics, can live out their skepticism without appearing incoherent or inconsistent, or whether skepticism is immoral or politically despicable. As we already know, in the classical historiography of skepticism<sup>4</sup>, there are two negative reactions to old skepticism, one asserts that skepticism is inconsistent or contradictory as a philosophy or a school<sup>5</sup>, and therefore it is impossible to live by it. And the other claims that skepticism is somehow immoral, and while we can live up to it<sup>6</sup>, it would be detrimental if we did.

Recently a third option has emerged that concludes that we can live up to skepticism, and that it is not necessarily a bad thing<sup>7</sup>. I agree with this position, but I add a subtle difference which is what I will demonstrate in this work. I think that all the controversies that “aporetically”, allude to skepticism, and that force us to stand on one of the two incompatible sides, always refer to the logical field of theoretical discussion in skepticism, but do not pay due attention to the level of practice<sup>8</sup>, of the daily and continuous living of that same movement, in which all types of skepticism tend to equalize and apply remedies that are very similar, to each other, and that are not incompatible with action. The more we read skeptical texts, there is a feeling that, for skepticism, the search for a theoretical truth is essentially useless, and that playing the game of philosophical dogmatism is an illusion without solution, that

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Sim, (2019), pp. 1-9.

<sup>4</sup> Laursen summarizes these reactions in (2004), PP. 201-204, checks them in (2009), and expands to the literature (2019).

<sup>5</sup> Burnyeat, (1980) and Mates, (1996) are strong defenders of the inconsistency or impossibility as a school to resolve the contradictions of skepticism against Barnes (1990) and Frede (1993). This generated a controversy that was reprinted for its educational value long after some researchers had proven that Burnyeat and Mates were wrong. Recently, Svavarsson (2019) tries to resolve these contradictions by appealing to two different types of passivity in the skeptic to save the principle of action, pp. 46-48.

<sup>6</sup> Martha Nussbaum, (1994) and Julia Annas, (1993) criticize skepticism as a certain “immoral” school, compared to other authors such as Willians, Stroud or Nagel and recently Bett, Engstler, Spinelli, Morrison, Hankinson or Laursen (2004), pp. 203-204.

<sup>7</sup> A strong defender of this position is Laursen, (2004), 202, who pursues it historiographically through Montaigne, Hume, Stanley, Brucker, and Stäudlin.

<sup>8</sup> As we have already studied in other works by Pyrrho (Román-Alcalá, 2009), the *bíos*, the plane of life was more important than the plane of logic or the philosophical, here we bet on skepticism understood more as a therapeutic activity that as a theoretical philosophy, see Spinelli, (2004), Plant, (2004), or Machuca-Redd (2018). Bett in his latest book (2021) seems to modify his well-known position and attributes to Sexto “an implausibly high level of sophistication, or an anachronistically postmodern sensibility” (pp. 22-23), in order to save the complex relationships between philosophy and ordinary life in the skepticism. This is what I am trying to explain in this article.

is, that a therapeutic life is better to achieve happiness, than a theoretical life that is always insecure and doubtful.

It is a natural fact that life cannot be suspended, contrary to the judgments or arguments we make about it. Thus, when Clytomachus held that human beings should refrain from making any judgment (*adsensus substitutere*, Cicero, *Acad. II*, 14), he admitted, however, that they had to decide in life, to make decisions, and that they move or have impulses towards things, and act in one way or another, drawing on and lending a certain credence to impressions from their senses, ignoring others that do not warrant their trust. This is what Sextus also means, when he states that the sceptic has a criterion not so much to distinguish what is true from what is false (a theoretical contrivance) but rather to cope with life.<sup>9</sup>

I propose to show that all kinds of scepticism (radical or sensible, rural or urban, Pyrrhonic or academic) coincide with this formula for living. And this is where Pyrrhonic scepticism, ancient academic scepticism, and the empirical scepticism of Sextus converge: being guided by phenomena or sensations felt that are imposed is to be guided by observation or experience, or impulses or tendencies, even if will or reason cannot have any firm grip on them.

It is as if we observed that, in matters of life, there is only one scepticism, which is hesitant, uncertain, and insecure, compelling one to decide with incomplete, indeterminate information and without stability; any criterion (εὐλογος, πιθανός, φαινόμενον), thus, is imperfect, but it fits or does not fit with our decision. There can be no unalterable assent in this action. Nobody is sure they are doing things right. We only have phenomena (Sextus), or impulses (Arcesilaus<sup>10</sup>), which lead the human being towards what is intrinsic to him (οἰκεῖος): phenomena, aware representation. Thus, the impulse that leads to action without being colonized by right reason (ὀρθός λόγος) is only action without confirmation, without assent or security in our decisions; that is, it is only moderation. As for Arcesilaus there is no representation that can absolutely persuade us of its truth, which means that the willingness to make one decision or another does not depend on things, on data, but rather on oneself. It is I, then, who decide, rather than the data making me decide.

Action, thus, is disconnected from any epistemological attempt to search for a criterion for action: it is therefore, impossible to relate theory and practice. Here is the ambiguity of skepticism, which discovers two systems of dealing with the world, one automatic, primitive, biological with a basic epistemological system, which ignores the inconveniences when it comes to acting and living, and the other highly qualified, theoretical, evolutionarily recent. and contaminated by language as an operator and generator of opinions that cannot ignore the severe epistemological difficulties to know anything. This is the terrifying idea of Frances in her book *Scepticism come alive*, who warns of this incompatibility of these two systems: “Your biological system knows that the table is brown even though your ‘higher’

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Sextus, *H.P.*, I, 21-23; 226; and, above all, VII, 29-30: “In the first place, therefore, the criterion (since we must start with this) is preferably used in two senses: in the first, it would be what we use to guide ourselves to do some things, and not others; and, in the second, it would be what we follow to state that some things exist and others do not, and that some things are true, and some others are false”, *Αὐτίκα τοῖνυν τὸ κριτήριον (ἀρκτέον γὰρ ἀπὸ τοῦπερα τλιγυ) τλέγυ μὲν διχῶς, καθ ἓνα μὲν τρόπον ὃ προσέχοντες τὰ μὲν ποιοῦμεν τὰ δὲ οὐδαμῶς, καθ ἕτερον δὲ ὃ προσέχοντες τὰ μὲν ὑπάρχειν φαμὲν τὰ δὲ μὴ ὑπάρχειν καὶ ταυτὶ μὲν ἀληθῆ καθεστάναι ταυτὶ δὲ ψευδῆ*. Text parallel to *H.P.*, II, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Plutarch, *Stoic. Repug.* 1057; *Adv. Col.*, 1122 BD.

faculty does not. The new skepticism are true for our opinion generators but not four our automatic belief generators”.

## 2. The folly of radical scepticism. Pyrrho and exaggerations

There is an old popular saying: “In theory, theory and practice are different; in practice, they are not”, which could be fully applied to Philosophy. In Pyrrho, according to what his disciple Timon tells us, there is a certain despair, born of not being able to achieve ataraxia rationally, because he has witnessed constant and continuous dissonance between the senses and reason, and due to the difficulty of isolating reality and recognizing it clearly, in one sense or another, all this leading to his suspension of assent, the “no more this than that” posture (οὐ μᾶλλον).

The greatest objection to scepticism has come in response to this suspension of judgment and of all beliefs. The suspension of judgment, a key element in sceptical philosophy, generates many difficulties when it comes to action. If we suspend all judgments and beliefs, the immediate question is: how is it possible to live? The Stoics expressed criticism to this effect, as it seems that the formation of beliefs is one of the essential characteristics of human cognitive activity.

This seems to be the meaning of a text widely used in the history of scepticism, and one of the few texts that are applicable, in some of their aspects, to Pyrrho of Elis. Timon’s text, quoted by Aristocles of Messene, a second-century Aristotelian, stated that things (τὰ πράγματα), reality, according to Pyrrho, could not be effectively known, as it remained indeterminate<sup>11</sup> and indiscernible, devoid of stability (ἀδιάφορα καὶ ἀστάθμητα καὶ ἀνεπίκριτα). To reach this statement, we have previously had to come to the conclusion that, by nature, we do not know anything, and if we do not know anything by nature, there is no point in investigating reality, or the world.<sup>12</sup>

It is the world, it is things that make us doubt and, therefore, neither our feelings nor our opinions are true or false. The sceptic Pyrrho became desperate at this statement, and declared, dogmatically, that it was necessary to be devoid of opinions, without prejudices, stating about each of those things “it no more is than it is not or it both is and is not or it neither is nor is not”, which earned him logical reproaches for breaking with the principle of non-contradiction.<sup>13</sup>

If we look closely, the most notable discussions of ancient scepticism fell along this line: the world, beliefs about the world, investigation of the world, the suspension of assent, the criterion of truth and appearances, while notions such as epistemological justification, the justification of doubt, or belief, typical of modern scepticism, did

<sup>11</sup> This characterization of reality as indeterminate already appears in Aristotle, *Metaph.* IV, 1007 b, 26-29, in a context of criticism of those philosophers, such as Protagoras and Anaxagoras, who denied the principle of non-contradiction; their error is that, believing that they speak of what is, or is not, they speak of the indeterminate: “They certainly seem to speak of the indeterminate, and although they think they refer to what is, they speak about what is not: what is potentially and not fully actualized is, of course, the indeterminate”, “τὸ ἀόριστον οὐδὲν εἰκότασι λέγειν, καὶ οἰόμενοι τὸ ὄν λέγειν περὶ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος λέγουσιν· τὸ γὰρ δυνάμει ὄν καὶ μὴ ἐντελεχεία τὸ ἀόριστόν ἐστιν”.

<sup>12</sup> In the text Aristocles already posed this gnoseological problem: “It is necessary, first of all, to inquire about our knowledge, since, if by nature we do not know anything, it is useless to investigate about the rest” αὐτῶν γνώσεως· εἰ γὰρ αὐτῶν μηδὲν πεφύκαμεν γνωρίζειν, οὐδὲν ἔτι δεῖ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων σκοπεῖν.”, Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.*, XIV, 18, 1-4; Declava Caizzi, 53; Diels, 9 A 2.

<sup>13</sup> De Garay, (2020), pp. 61-64.

not play a key role in sceptical discussions. Pyrrho here followed a pre-Socratic sceptical line through the Abderite philosophy<sup>14</sup> of Metrodorus of Chios<sup>15</sup> in which it was affirmed that “nobody knows anything”, a statement that can be turned against itself in a typical self-refutative case. The epistemological dilemma that arose was not irrelevant, as it pushed the sceptic towards theoretical collapse and left him on the brink of inaction.

The interesting thing about Pyrrho is that he wanted his life to reflect his philosophy, and to break away from that difficulty typical of antisceptical criticism, thereby avoiding the challenge of apraxia. A text suggesting that we just must live,<sup>16</sup> cited by Diogenes, perfectly conveys this prioritisation of the practical over the theoretical:

in one’s confrontation with things one must fight, as far as possible, first with works, and if not, with reasoning.<sup>17</sup>

Sextus Empiricus technically solves this labyrinth into which the previous text introduces us, appealing to common sense. Thus, when it comes to deciding between situations that occur to us in life, we cannot lose sight of what appears to us: “Therefore, paying attention to phenomena, we live without opinions, in the observance of vital demands, as we cannot be completely inactive”<sup>18</sup>. Pyrrho lives in indifference and impassivity (DL IX, 66, 67 and 68), with a peaceful life, having no interest in anything or anyone. This attitude, rare and incompatible with coming to understanding others and dealing with the demands of life, gave his enemies numerous elements for mockery and ridicule. The result is a portrait of indifferent Pyrrho, on the one hand, but edifying, on the other, who tries to harmonize theory and practice, often without succeeding, making a fool of himself in front of his fellow citizens<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Román, (2019), pp. 325-326.

<sup>15</sup> “Metrodoro de Chios said that nobody knows anything, but the things that we think we know, we do not know exactly, nor is it necessary to pay attention to sensations; indeed, all things depend upon opinion”, *Μητροδόροσ ὁ Χίος ἔφη μηδένα μηδὲν ἐπίστασθαι ἀλλὰ τὰ ταῦτα, οκοῦμεν γινώσκειν, ἀκριβῶσ οὐκ ἐπιστάμεθα οὐδὲ ταῖσ αἰσθήσσει δεῖ προσέχειν· δοκῆσει γάρ ἐστί τὰ πάντα* Eriphanus, *Adv. haer.*, III, 2, 9: DK 70 A 23; cfr: Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.*, XIV, 19, 8-9: Migne, P.G., XXI, 1260 B.

<sup>16</sup> The character in Fernando Pessoa’s *Book of Disquiet*, Bernardo Soares, reflecting on the impossibility of having theories and living at the same time, expresses it well: “to think is to destroy ... to think is to break down” (& 362), “To live is to not think”, (& 374), “to narrate is to create, because to live is only to be lived” (& 371), “the sacred instinct of not having theories” (& 369), “before the reality of life, all the fictions of literature and art sound vapid” - or philosophy, we might add (& 378), Pessoa, (2009).

<sup>17</sup> “διαγωνίζεσθαι δ’ ὅσ οἶόν τε πρῶτον μὲν τοῖσ ἔργοισ πρὸσ τὰ πράγματα, εἰ δὲ μὴ, τῶ γε λόγῳ”, D.L., IX, 66. This text comes immediately after another very famous one in which a colleague mocks Pyrrho, who, when he notices the presence of a rabid dog, does not doubt his perception, and runs off like a bat out of hell to avoid being bitten: “Shaken up by a dog’s attack, he responded to he who reproached him that it was very difficult to shed one’s humanity”: καὶ κυνός ποτ’ ἐπενεχθέντοσ διασοβηθέντα εἰπεῖν πρὸσ τόν αἰτιασάμενον, ὡσ χυλεπὸν εἶη ὄλοσχερῶσ ἐκδύναι τὸν ἄνθρωπον». DL, IX, 66: Declava Caizzi, 15 B. This text is confirmed by another by Aristocles that reproduces Antigonos’s same testimony: “Antigonos of Carystus, who lived at the same time and wrote his biography, said that Pyrrho, pursued by a dog, took refuge in a tree, and when those present made fun of him for it, he responded that it is very difficult for one to shed his humanity”, Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.*, XIV, 18, 26: Migne, P.G. XXI, 1253.

<sup>18</sup> “Τοῖσ φαινόμενοισ οὖν προσέχοντεσ κατὰ τὴν βιωτικὴν τήρησιν ἀδοξάστωσ βιοῦμεν, ἐπεὶ μὴ δυνάμεθα ἀνερέγγητοι παντάσασιν εἶναι. Sextus, *H.P.*, I 23.

<sup>19</sup> See Note 15.

Faced with the paradoxes of his position, he told those who criticised him that it *is difficult for a man to shed what is inherent to him*, and recognized *the impossibility of transcending* our intrinsic nature. In other words, as we have said above, in theory, theory and practice are different, but not in practice, as one must act even when he knows that things can be presented in a misleading way. From a gnoseological point of view, human beings get confused about things (*Pragmata*), because they are presented in such a way that they deceive us. Hence, we must gnoseologically struggle against the supposedly clear way in which they manifest themselves and against blind acceptance of what they seem to “be”; that is, with words well recognized in the philosophical sphere, “of what they are.”

In the face of this, Pyrrho’s response is exaggerated, and often lacks realism or pragmatism, if we are to believe the anecdotes that have come down to us about his life. Deep down, however, I believe that his position towards the appearance of things was not that they should only be discussed philosophically, but rather they should be dealt with, in order to live, albeit without complete conviction<sup>20</sup>. How is this done? This is what Timon asks in a famous text cited by Diogenes: “This, Pyrrho, my heart wishes to hear, how is it that, being a man, you live with such serenity, the only one who, like a god, guides men”<sup>21</sup>. Perhaps Pyrrho, instead of grappling with the classic epistemological problems of traditional Greek thought (doubt, limited knowledge, the difficulty of a criterion of truth), translates all his atomistic, dogmatic learning<sup>22</sup> and mixes it with Oriental thought (with which he came into contact through Alexander’s expedition), in a type of philosophy in which theory and praxis are incorporated in a balanced way, with the sole purpose of achieving, above all, *ataraxia*.<sup>23</sup> Thus, we must react to phenomena, because we come across them, and they constitute everything, but we must not state that they are true, or represent true knowledge, as dogmatic philosophers do.

### 3. Another example: the judicious and sensible posture of academic scepticism

There is a classic, ancient disagreement between sceptics and dogmatists, or anti-sceptics, regarding the possibility of living according to scepticism, in a practical manner, as this would mean that sceptics would have to accept or follow epistemological criteria of some kind, which would produce a certain paradox. Much later, Moore believed he found, in a somewhat naive way, the sceptics’ failure in the impossibility of assigning more value to supposed sceptics, who doubt knowledge of reality, than to the perceptual knowledge that we have of reality itself.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Vid.* Sextus, *M.*, XI, 165-166 and *H.P.*, I, 23-24, Sextus says that the skeptic will behave according to his culture, his education and the environment in which he is, Bett (2019), p. 173-174, warns that these criteria would be useful in everyday life, but not in revolutionary or radically changing situations.

<sup>21</sup> “τοῦτό μοι, ὃ Πύρρων, ἰμειρεται ἦτορ ἀκοῦσαι, πῶς ποτ’ ἀνὴρ ὅτ’ ἄγεις ῥᾶστα μεθ’ ἡσυχίης μῶνους ἐν ἀνθρώποισι θεοῦ τρόπον ἡγεμονέων”, D.L., IX, 65: Decleva Caizzi, 61 B; *cf.* DL, IX, 64-65, here Timon praises Pyrrho again for his way of life, since, though having property and honours, he did not allow himself to be corrupted by them.

<sup>22</sup> See Román Alcalá, (2019a), pp. 321-333; this article demonstrates this connection.

<sup>23</sup> *There is an ataraxia according to Democritus*, *Cfr.* DK 68 A 167; *an Epicurean*, DL, X, 82; *and another Pyrrhonic one*; for example, Eusebius, *Praep. Evang.*, XIV, 18, 4 or *SEXTUS*, HP, I, 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Cf.* Moore, (1959a), PP. 196-226.



He used a well-known argument today about the irrefutable evidence that there is and can be found of the existence of an outside world. In his second version, more refined than the first, he provided a set of “evidence of an external world”, with which he aimed to criticise the sceptical tendency to doubt reality. Thus, he argued that if I say, A, “here I have a hand”; and B, “here I have another hand”; and C, “my hands are objects external to my mind”; we have no choice but to conclude that D, “the external world exists<sup>25</sup>.” According to him, there was no sensible refutation of this argument<sup>26</sup>. But this is not as easy to accept as he believed, for even philosophers who did not sympathize with scepticism were uncomfortable with what appeared to be a dogmatic rejection of the sceptic challenge, since it is as dogmatic to accept that the world is indeterminate, without any, stability and indiscernible, as is it is to inflexibly assert that, in this case, we are sure we have one or two hands, without clarifying why we are sure of this knowledge,<sup>27</sup> simply stating that it would be absurd to deny that one has a hand. Ultimately, then, we would operate on two irreconcilable planes: on the one hand, the truth of a set of sceptical epistemic principles; and, on the other, the epistemic values of a set of beliefs that make life possible.

Theoretically, we once again reach a dead end, because either we are wise men who are able to recognise distinctive marks of truth or certainty (Cicero, *Aad.*, II, 103), as the Stoics proposed through *kataleptic phantasia*, (evident representation - of the thing - that seizes us, which is complete and undoubtable), or we could not act, turning our life into pure *apraxia*. Arcesilaus, very practical, recognized that a wise man could not accept mere opinions or beliefs without them being at least minimally justified, but he also recognized that it was impossible to recognize a *kataleptic phantasia* so evident it that it would connect us with the truth. In theory, it was impossible to find something secure that would lead us to assent in the moral decision. But, in practice, after activating the epistemological *epoché*, the sceptic had to act and make the action possible without assent. Acting without a foundation, that is the challenge. I believe that Sextus understood this very well when, in an argumentative way, when, talking about Arcesilaus, he said the following:

Arcesilaus says that he who suspends judgment on all things will regulate his inclinations, his aversions and his actions, in general based on the criterion of reasonableness, and, proceeding according to this system, will act well. In fact, happiness results from prudence, but prudence is exercised in right action; and right action is that which, once performed, has a reasonable justification. Thus, he who heeds what is reasonable will act rightly, and be happy.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Moore (1959b), pp. 27-150.

<sup>26</sup> As well demonstrated by Reed, (2019), pp. 63-80, this idea of Moore's would be nothing more than another dogmatic and inconsistent initial principle.

<sup>27</sup> Wittgenstein left us ample evidence of the difficulties of this argument in his last, unfinished work: *Über Gewissheit (On Certainty)* (1998). From the first line, Wittgenstein wishes to make clear, ironically, his position regarding Moore's criticism, saying: “If you know that there is a hand here, we will grant you everything else”. Tejedor (1996), pp. 287-288, clearly presents the two different positions of Moore and Wittgenstein on skepticism, and analyzes Wittgenstein's critique of Moore's argument.

<sup>28</sup> φησὶν ὁ Ἀρκεσίλαος ὅτι ὁ περὶ πάντων ἐπέχων κανονιεῖ τὰς αἰρέσεις καὶ φυγὰς καὶ κοινῶς τὰς πράξεις τῶ εὐλόγῳ, κατὰ τοῦτό τε προερχόμενος τὸ κριτήριον κατορθώσει· τὴν μὲν γὰρ εὐδαιμονίαν περιγίνεσθαι διὰ τῆς φρονήσεως, τὴν δὲ φρόνησιν κείσθαι ἐν τοῖς κατόρθώμασιν, τὸ δὲ κατόρθωμα εἶναι ὅπερ πραχθὲν εὐλογον ἔχει τὴν ἀπολογίαν. ὁ προσέχων οὖν τῷ εὐλόγῳ κατορθώσει καὶ εὐδαιμονήσει. Sextus, *M.*, VII, 158.

The text proceeds from a suspension of belief, which is not a limitation of the possibility of action. For the academic there is no apraxia in the sceptic, there is no non-action, in either of the two classical versions; neither the exaggerated one, which states that scepticism is incompatible with rational action, since for the Stoics knowledge was necessary for action<sup>29</sup>; nor the more balanced one, according to which scepticism, if it does not give its assent and consent to the known, is not capable of taking any action, or any impulse towards it<sup>30</sup>, thus noting that, if the sceptic undermines our ability to assent, he also nullifies our ability to act.<sup>31</sup>

Both formulas are rejected, as we have seen, by academic sceptics, with a proposal of minimums recognized by Sextus, since, as he observes, for them things are neither good nor bad, but rather plausible or probable. That is, academics hold on to the varying *likelihood* that things are good or bad, and not to the essentiality of goodness or badness, and in this way, they can live insecurely, but actively.

#### 4. Sextus Empiricus: following the imperatives of life without dogmatism

Sextus, the third example of what we are arguing, reflects the age in which he lived. His scepticism was a cold and scientific summary of the old sceptical doctrines. The sceptics of this period were doctors, which meant that they would try to replace theories with medicine. They were representatives of a kind of knowledge based on observation, of a nascent form of science. They were, formally, almost pure phenomenists, as philosophy was replaced by observation and experience (τήρησις).<sup>32</sup> It seems that Sextus was among the first to use this term, from the verb τήρειω, traditionally linked to guarding or taking care of things, as an empirical term in the sense of observing, perceiving, or noticing.

This is the idea in Sextus's head when he proposes his ideas to us in a text aforesaid: "Therefore, paying attention to phenomena, we live without opinions, following experience in what concerns life, since we cannot be completely inactive"<sup>33</sup>. Again, praxis prevailed over theory until a term was created so that there was no doubt about what *κατὰ τὴν βιωτικὴν τήρησιν* referred to, and this did not leave it imprecise. He was clear on what it referred to, because this life experience consists of four rules: first, *ἐν ὑφηγήσει φύσεως*, to follow the advice or guidance of nature, letting oneself be carried away by nature; second, *ἐν ἀναγκῇ παθῶν*, to accept the obligatory nature, the fatality, the need for the passions; third, *ἐν παραδόσει νόμων*

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Origen, *Princ.* 3, 1-5; SVF, 2, 988; Long-Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Vol. 2, 53 A. Every rational animal, according to Origen, has logos, because he judges representations (impressions) distinguishes them by rejecting some and accepting others, and acts accordingly.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Plutarch, *St. rep.*, 1057A; SVF, 3, 177; Long-Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, Vol. 2, 53 S, see also Cicero, *Acad.*, II, 108.

<sup>31</sup> We have already shown argumentatively that it is possible to act without assenting to the action, without feeling morally identified with the action that we have selected; see Román-Alcalá, (2019b), pp. 265–272.

<sup>32</sup> Theudas seems to have been the first to use the word τήρησις (observation) to mean what until then was referred to as αὐτοψία (the act of seeing with one's own eyes). Theudas wrote two works: *Εἰσαγωγή* and *Κεφάλαια*, known and criticized by Galen (Cf. Galen, *De libr. Propr.* IX, vol XIX, p. 38), who believed that medical knowledge should be gathered via observation, but added, that it is necessary to not only accumulate observations, but to use reason to evaluate them; cf. Galen, *De subfiguratione empirica*, p. 41.

<sup>33</sup> "Τοῖς φαινομένοις οὐκ προσέχοντες κατὰ τὴν βιωτικὴν τήρησιν ἀδοξάστως βιοῦμεν, ἐπεὶ μὴ δυνάμεθα ἀνερέγγητοι παντάπασιν εἶναι", Sextus, H.P., I 23.



τε καὶ ἐθῶν, accepting the legacy or inheritance of customs and laws; and, finally, the learning of knowledge, of science or the arts ἐν διδασκαλίᾳ τεχνῶν<sup>34</sup>.

And each one explains it, as, according to our nature, we are capable of thinking and feeling like human beings, and not like animals, but there are a series of needs that we cannot ignore: when we are thirsty, we drink; when we are hungry, we eat; and we also accept, by an implicit or explicit pact, that laws and customs entail definitions that we accept, such that we agree on what it means to be good and pious, and bad and impious. Finally, we observe that human beings are capable of learning, so we learn a set of arts or techniques that are useful for life, and we master them<sup>35</sup>. Therefore, it must be said that the end of scepticism (understanding by “end” what at a certain moment guides our actions and our reasoning in life<sup>36</sup>) is ataraxia, peace of mind and moderation in our needs. A very pragmatic goal or end, in its construction, and not at all ideal. This is the rule of balance between reasons and actions, of weighing, equilibrium, good sense and moderation, because we have seen the continuous dissonance between the senses and reason, and to vehemently take sides for something is to be absolutely wrong in everything.

Let us be happy, but in an indifferent way, without being sure of things, acting in each case as our nature guides us, being prudent in our choices and moderate in our needs. And this is because for Sextus, sensibly, for each theoretical reasoning there can be an opposite theoretical reasoning, of equal strength (H.P. I, 10). The reality or truth of things seems to be inaccessible, and the possibility of having a definitive certainty is an impossibility of thought.<sup>37</sup> Sextus insists that scepticism cannot dogmatically accept or reject any impression, nor affirm or reject on its basis anything about concepts or theories. This is the sceptic’s task: continuous investigation that prevents the thinker, or the doctor, or scientist from being in a state of mental or psychological or physical inactivity (ἀνεργεσία). This is why he decides, *a posteriori*, to suspend judgment, above all to not face the risk of being wrong about something, but that ἐποχή does not impede the activity.<sup>38</sup>

And this is why Sextus is clear on the fact that in the face of life, the sceptical philosopher cannot be inactive. Hence, he must find criteria, phenomena, appearances, that guide our lives in a methodical and empirical way: “It was, in fact, necessary

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Sextus, H.P., I, 23-24.

<sup>35</sup> This idea seems to have been refuted today in the field of new technologies, as that principle linked to nature that had guided us has disappeared, as lately we learn things that only make sense in a virtual environment or world, but that have no connection with the vital processes of our lives.

<sup>36</sup> And the next thing will be to deal with the “end” of the skeptical school. Now, an “end” is “that for which, on the one hand, we do or think all things, while it is not by virtue of any of them (it is alien to all of them).” Well, from now on we say that the end of skepticism is serenity of spirit...”

Τούτοις ἀκόλουθον ἂν εἴη καὶ περὶ τοῦ τέλους τῆς σκεπτικῆς ἀγωγῆς διελεῖν. ἔστι μὲν οὖν τέλος τὸ οὐ χάρις πάντα πράττεται ἢ θεωρεῖται, αὐτὸ δὲ οὐδενὸς ἔνεκα, ἢ τὸ ἔσχατον τῶν ὀρεκτῶν. Φαμὲν δὲ ἄχρι νῦν τέλος εἶναι τοῦ σκεπτικῆς τὴν ἐν τοῖς κατὰ δόξαν ἀταραξίαν καὶ ἐν τοῖς κατηναγκασιμένοις μετριοπάθειαν”, Sextus, H. P., I, 25

<sup>37</sup> There is an anecdote from Antoine Fuqua’s movie *Shooter* that reflects this fact well: Mr. Rate, a sage who knows a lot about life (and is a major weapons expert) tells Sergeant Bob Lee Swagger: “the world is not what it seems, man, get that in your head. Just when you think you’re sure, then you’re wrong”.

<sup>38</sup> Sextus is very concerned about this issue, hence expressions like σκεπτικὴ δύναμις (for example, H.P., I, 8, 13-16, 28, 30, 197-198, etc., and M., VII, 1, 27, 343, 433 etc.) σκεπτικὴ ἀγωγή (for example, H.P., I, 3, 19, 29, 36, 189, etc.) and V want to ward off the danger of thinking of skepticism as a philosophy, a set of theories or doctrines condemned to inactivity, which is why he presents it as an orientation or capacity, as a method or faculty or way of philosophizing and living.

that the aporetic philosopher, not wanting to be completely inert and inactive in the activities of life, must have a criterion of both choice and resignation; this is, what appears, as Timon also testified, saying: “But, what appears always prevails, wherever it presents itself.”<sup>39</sup>

Sextus is telling us, with a current mentality, that empiricism is a fundamental source of knowledge, while underscoring, at the same time (and this is what is interesting) the relativity of all the data that comes to us through these appearances, and the human being’s inability to be absolutely certain of them. The dialectic between the context of discovery and the context of justification is endless. Science and philosophy, therefore, provide insufficient elements, which is why Sextus concludes that, although we are constantly investigating reality without reaching conclusions, phenomena, appearances, must be accepted, because, although they cannot provide the truth, they can provide a guide for life.

## 5. A socialized scepticism

The sceptic, then, can live without dogmatizing, but not without activity. Sceptics cannot be apathetic, without passions and inactive, despite the moral conflicts that exist when deciding, in one way or another, our actions. Despite disaccord, we have to act, even knowing that there are no criteria to decide between these conflicts. In practice, we can act only probabilistically, or reasonably, without being certain of the truth or falsity of our decisions. This will mean establishing, based on this moral dissonance,<sup>40</sup> that moral judgments lack a truthful-functional foundation.

And I think that, despite the complex structure of these sceptical arguments based on dissonance, moral scepticism is certainly persuasive, since most of us, in practice, exercise a socialized scepticism when it comes to resolving moral problems, and make decisions based on the most persuasive arguments. In other words, in theory we can split hairs and debate on moral or cognitive problems. In fact, we can also debate on some recurring questions on which not even the sceptics can agree. For example, there is repeated debate on naturalism in Greek scepticism: on the one hand, we know that the sceptic is opposed to moral naturalism, since there is, in his opinion, no moral proposition that is justified through objective characteristics of the world, independent of human opinion. But, on the other hand, he ratifies it by respecting, in an amicable and considerate way, the customs, modes and manners (social, moral ...) of the places where he lives<sup>41</sup> (following the old age “when in Rome, do as the Romans do”). These two positions are, *a priori*, contradictory, and no one can defend them simultaneously, at any given moment.

In practice, however, each situation is new, which the academics understood when they used the term *πιθανός*, not so much as a criterion of knowledge as a criterion for action, as a way to overcome *πραξία*, the lack of decision in practical life.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> “κατ’ ἀνάγκην γὰρ ἔδει τὸν ἀπορητικῆς φιλοσοφοῦντα, μὴ εἰς τὸ παντελὲς ἀνενέργητον ὄντα καὶ ἐν ταῖς κατὰ τὸν βίον πράξεσιν ἄπρακτον, ἔχειν τι κριτήριον αἰρέσεως ἅμα καὶ φυγῆς, τοῦτέστι τὸ φαινόμενον, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Τίμων μεμαρτύρηκεν εἰπὼν «ἀλλὰ τὸ φαινόμενον πάντη σθένει, οὔπερ ἂν ἔλθῃ»”. Sextus, *M.*, VII, 30: Decleva Caizzi, 63 B.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Joyce, (2018), pp. 141-162.

<sup>41</sup> See Joyce, p. 141.

<sup>42</sup> Bett concurs with these lines, although noting that Carneades could never effectively refute the objections to

The term *πιθανός* comes from *πειθέσθαι* and means, precisely, that which inspires confidence, that which persuades, hence the verb *πείθω* is to convince, to persuade one of something. For Cicero this term first reflects the need we have to conduct ourselves in life, without assurances, simply through our moral decisions,<sup>43</sup> and then a guide for knowledge and reflection.

Sextus also saw it this way,<sup>44</sup> stating that no dogmatic moral doctrine can provide us with a happy life, as it forces human beings to decide absolutely, producing in us a moral anguish impeding peace and tranquillity. Each dogmatism requires its followers to seek the good and avoid the evil, previously defined, with choices and rejections. And they state that it is not possible to pursue anything other than what they propose, even being aware that they can produce greater evils, which results in an agonizing choice between options. Sextus masterfully exemplifies this idea drawing upon another medical metaphor: “And so, like the doctor who cures pleurisy, but causes pneumonia, or who prevents an attack of insanity, but leaves lethargy in its place, not eliminating the danger, but rather creating another, so the philosopher who introduces one source of anguish instead of another does not help he who is anguished.”<sup>45</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

Sometimes we look to reason for a solution that it cannot provide. The solution is given by life itself, which mixes intuitive with rational knowledge, and is guided by what appears. Nobody needs to demonstrate rationally or with any criteria of truth that, in most cases, helping others is better than strangling them (and, although I may be wrong, it seems that the former really is better than the latter), but I always have to be attentive to what appears before me, so as not to make the mistake of letting my neighbour strangle me. Hence, we normally do not act based on established principles. Rather, we act according to this socialized scepticism, to this “watch out” approach that we all adopt, allowing ourselves to be convinced by the data that we have,<sup>46</sup> in a relative way, assimilating that what is probable, or plausible, or reasonable in each situation determines that we will move in one direction or another, with everything depending on what appears to us, on phenomena. It is evident that some do act in accordance with established and immovable principles, but when they are wrong, because they have absolute or dogmatic principles, they are *absolutely* wrong.<sup>47</sup>

To conclude, we can recognize that, in theory, the sceptic can live without any beliefs, orientations or inclinations, but in practice, this seems impossible. As human

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his criteria: “Carneades’ Phithanon”, p. 71, 76 and 90.

<sup>43</sup> Cicero, *Acad.*, II, X, 32.

<sup>44</sup> Every dogmatism makes demands of its followers Sextus, *M.*, XI, 131-140.

<sup>45</sup> ὡς οὖν ὁ ἰατρός ἀναρῶν μὲν πλευρίτιν ποιῶν δὲ περιπνευμονίαν, ἢ ἀνασκευάζων μὲν φρενίτιν ἀντείσγων δὲ λήθαργον, οὐκ ἀπαλλάττει τὸν κίνδυνον ἀλλ’ ἐναλλάττει, οὕτω καὶ ὁ φιλόσοφος ἐτέραν ταραχὴν ἀνθ’ ἐτέρας εἰσηγούμενος οὐ βοηθεῖ τῷ ταραττομένῳ. Sextus, *M.*, XI, 136-137.

<sup>46</sup> These orientations, inclinations, and even beliefs, although I would not call them that, or only a minimal percentage of them, must exist in the human being, see Clej, pp. 11-13.

<sup>47</sup> This is the meaning of Galen’s words when he stated before his disciples that not even in the most established matters were they free from the danger of error, from making mistakes: Gal. *de opt. doctr.* p. 179, 1, 3-10 = p. 92, 1, 1-11: Περί μηδενὸς πράγματος ὀρίσασθαι μηδ’ ἀποφίνασθαι βεβαίως (“Do not take a definitive position on anything that is explained”).

beings who have a certain nature, and who are guided by what we perceive, or seems most expedient, or plausible, it is essential to be able to decide, to take different measures in order to deal with the world. When we perform an action, our human mind forms different beliefs (orientations, inclinations) that enable us for action. We cannot say, however, that these beliefs are “true” (such that we would have to invent a new term) but they are the basis for our behaviour. Scepticism would, thus, seem coherent, in practice, but fictitious, in theory<sup>48</sup>, although certainly unbeatable by means of certain and unquestionable logical-ontological procedures.

Dogmatic philosophy plays with concepts with the diverting pretence of solving (because it believes that it does) the problem of life’s paradoxical and uncertain nature. Tolstoy, at the end of his *Ana Karenina*, referring to the rationalist philosophers, says that they play with their concepts: “like children, delighted by everyday (and healthy we would say) fare, we prefer indigestible sweets”.<sup>49</sup> I accept, Tolstoy continues at the end of the book, my limitation and my imperfection; I accept that I can only decide taking into account observation, and appearances and incomplete ideas. But then, we say, when we make any moral or other decision, I will be almost convinced that my inner life will be free of anguish and terrors, accepting my uncertainty not as something negative, without the possibility of truth, but as something positive, free of most errors. We are not dealing with a heroic morality, no sir, but if you come across a sceptic, he may not be concerned with getting it right, which is what produces applause, but rather with avoiding the kinds of mistakes that produce weeping.

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<sup>48</sup> In a pessimistic or ironic way, this is the thesis of Frances (2012), pp. 180-182, 199-203, paradoxical and without solution, skepticism would be in a true sense and in a false sense, in practice, the skeptic in one way or another, is forced to live with opinions about things, while in theory the arguments are correct and fail for some reason or another: “Then, the ambiguity solutions must be that that belief token amounts to knowledge when considered one way but not when considered another way. I don’t know what that could mean, or why it isn’t a skeptical solution” (p. 182).

<sup>49</sup> Tolstoy, (1969), p. 616.

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