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Preface

The bulk of the essays collected in this volume derive from papers presented at a conference on Pyrrhonian skepticism held in Buenos Aires on August 6–8, 2008. I am grateful to all the speakers who accepted the invitation to participate in the meeting. Other arrangements had been made for the publication of several of the papers, so these are not included here. By contrast, four additional essays by scholars who could not attend the conference have been incorporated. My thanks to them for being willing to contribute to the volume. I wish as well to express my gratitude to the Departamento de Humanidades y Artes of the Universidad Nacional de Lanús and to the Agencia Nacional de Promoción Científica y Tecnológica of Argentina for the financial support that made it possible to organize the conference. My thanks also go to Simo Knuuttila for agreeing to publish the volume in *The New Synthese Historical Library*, and to Willemijn Arts and Ingrid van Laarhoven from Springer for their help through the various stages of the project. Finally, I would like to thank the referee for Springer for his helpful comments on the manuscript.

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Diego E. Machuca

Introduction

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Among scholars of ancient philosophy there is today considerable interest in the extant works of the second-century physician Sextus Empiricus as our most important source for Pyrrhonian skepticism. Until not long ago, though, they used to regard his writings exclusively as an invaluable source of information about non-Pyrrhonian thinkers and schools whose positions would otherwise be more obscure or even utterly unknown. A radical change in the way of approaching Sextus' oeuvre started to take place since the late 1970s and early 1980s, when a group of scholars began to explore the complex history of ancient Pyrrhonism and the *sui generis* character of this form of skepticism. Although some have questioned its coherence, it is safe to say that most have recognized its philosophical import.

A fact that sometimes goes unnoticed even to this day regarding the Pyrrhonian tradition is that its history did not end with Sextus and his immediate successors, since it has had a tremendous impact on both modern and contemporary philosophy. As regards the modern period, a considerable number of historians of ideas have argued that the Renaissance rediscovery of Sextus' works played a key role in the formation of modern thought.¹ Richard Popkin in particular maintained that the revival of Pyrrhonism triggered a "Pyrrhonian crisis."² According to him, the history of modern philosophy should to a large extent be construed as the history of the various strategies which modern thinkers devised to deal with that crisis.³ As for the contemporary philosophical scene, an important number of epistemologists have vigorously discussed the Pyrrhonian arguments against the rational justification of

¹The resurgence of Pyrrhonian skepticism was due especially to the publication of Henri Estienne's Latin translation of Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in 1562 and of Gentian Hervet's Latin translation of *Adversus Mathematicos* and *Adversus Dogmaticos* in 1569.

²Popkin (1960) is the pioneering work on the impact of ancient skepticism (especially in its Pyrrhonian variety) on modern philosophy, covering the period from Erasmus to Descartes. Popkin (1979) extends the analysis to Spinoza, and Popkin (2003) reaches back to Savonarola and forward to Bayle. For the influence of Pyrrhonism, and ancient skepticism in general, on modern thought, see also Popkin (1993), Maia Neto and Popkin (2004), Paganini (2008), Maia Neto, Paganini, and Laursen (2009), Paganini and Maia Neto (2009), and Naya (2011).

³Some scholars have argued that Popkin overstates the part played by Pyrrhonism in shaping modern thought. See Ayers (2004) and Perler (2004).

our beliefs – what they now call “Agrippa’s trilemma.”⁴ Coherentists, foundationalists, and infinitists, as well as externalists and contextualists have adopted different tactics to deal with that challenge. Moreover, some present-day thinkers have characterized their own philosophical positions as “(neo-)Pyrrhonian.”⁵ Thus, in parallel with the strong interest in Pyrrhonism aroused among ancient philosophy scholars, Sextus’ writings have in recent years increasingly attracted the attention of historians of modern philosophy and analytic philosophers.⁶

Collections of essays dealing with skepticism can in general be divided into two groups, each of which has been the object of a criticism. Some collections are said to adopt an approach which is exclusively historical and exegetical and to overlook the current discussion of skepticism in systematic analytic philosophy, thus ignoring much of its philosophical import. By contrast, others are said to take an approach which is solely systematic and to explore certain skeptical arguments *in abstracto*, thus neglecting their origin and history, without which it is impossible to fully appreciate them. The present volume intends to avoid these criticisms by integrating the strengths and merits of both types of collections: it explores the history and significance of Pyrrhonism in ancient and modern philosophy and examines the Pyrrhonian outlook in relation to contemporary analytic philosophy. Moreover, going beyond the common distinction between a historical and a systematic approach, some of the essays combine specialized historical scholarship about the Pyrrhonian tradition with rigorous philosophical examination of the nature of Pyrrhonism and the challenges it poses. The reason for combining historical exegesis with systematic investigation is confidence in the viability and the desirability of exploring a philosophical stance both in its historical context and in connection with contemporary concerns.

By analyzing various aspects of Pyrrhonian skepticism as it was conceived of in its original Greek context and later on in the modern period, and as it is interpreted in the contemporary philosophical scene, the essays collected in this volume will allow the reader to witness the transformations undergone by the Pyrrhonian tradition. This tradition is complex and multifaceted, since the Pyrrhonian arguments have been put into the service of different enterprises or been approached in relation to interests which are quite distinct. It is thus impossible to find an entirely homogeneous or monolithic picture of the Pyrrhonian outlook from the Hellenistic period to the present day. The diversity of uses and conceptions of Pyrrhonism accounts for the diversity of the challenges it is deemed to pose and of the attempts to meet them. This philosophical richness and adaptability should be borne in mind by anyone studying the Pyrrhonian tradition.

⁴See, e.g., Fogelin (1994), Sosa (1997), Williams (2004), Klein (2008), and Lammenranta (2008). Agrippa’s trilemma is also known as “Münchhausen-Trilemma,” as Hans Albert (1985) has called it.

⁵See Fogelin (1994, 2004), Porchat Pereira (2006), and Sinnott-Armstrong (2006).

⁶For an overview of Sextus’ legacy in modern and contemporary philosophy, see Machuca (2008, 58–63).

Before introducing the twelve contributions that make up the present volume, it is perhaps necessary to account for the absence of essays devoted to the presence of Pyrrhonism in Latin medieval thought. The explanation is simple: although discussion of skeptical problems and arguments is well attested in Western Europe during the Middle Ages,⁷ Pyrrhonism played a very small part, since direct acquaintance with Pyrrhonian texts was rare, with the result that knowledge of this brand of skepticism was extremely limited.⁸ First, three manuscripts of an early-fourteenth-century Latin translation of Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* probably by Niccolò da Reggio (*ca.* 1280–1350) survive, but this translation seems to have exerted no influence whatsoever.⁹ One of these manuscripts also contains a partial Latin translation of Sextus' *Adversus Mathematicos* III–V, probably by the same author.¹⁰ Second, it has recently been argued that, in Nicholas of Autrecourt's treatment of the infinite regress argument, it is possible to identify certain Pyrrhonian elements,¹¹ which would show that in the fourteenth century there was at least some knowledge of Sextus. Finally, a manuscript remains which contains a fifteenth-century Latin translation of the first four books of *Adversus Mathematicos* by Giovanni Lorenzi, but it does not seem to have had any circulation.¹²

In the Middle Ages, so-called Academic skepticism was better known than Pyrrhonism due especially to Augustine's *Contra Academicos*, and also to other works such as Cicero's *Academica*, *De Natura Deorum*, and *Tusculanae*.¹³ But there were also important skeptical arguments peculiar to medieval philosophy, such as that which refers to an all-powerful God that could deceive us.¹⁴ However, contrary to what happened before and after the Middle Ages, during this period there were no skeptics in either the Christian, Jewish, or Islamic traditions, with the only possible exception of John of Salisbury (*ca.* 1120–1180), who considered himself an

⁷It has recently been claimed that historians of skepticism have usually ignored the important part played by both epistemological and external-world skepticism during the Middle Ages, and that this has prevented them from realizing that medieval discussions of skepticism must be taken into account in order to fully understand the history of modern skepticism. In this connection, see the essays collected in Lagerlund (2010). For an overview of medieval skepticism from the thirteenth century on, see Perler (2006).

⁸See Schmitt (1983, 226–7), Porro (1994, 229–37), Floridi (2002, 13–25). Greek/Byzantine and Arabic scholars, by contrast, continued to read Pyrrhonian texts during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages (see Porro 1994, 235 n. 16; Floridi 2002, 20–2, 24–5). For instance, in his *Myriobiblon* or *Library*, Photius, the ninth-century Patriarch of Constantinople, offers a summary of Aenesidemus' lost *Pyrrhonian Discourses*, which is now our most important source for his thought.

⁹See Schmitt (1983, 227), Porro (1994, 230–5). For a detailed analysis of these manuscripts, see Cavini (1977, 1–8), Floridi (2002, 63–9), and especially Wittwer (forthcoming).

¹⁰See Cavini (1977, 4, 8–9), Floridi (2002, 79–80).

¹¹See Grellard (2007a).

¹²See Schmitt (1976), Porro (1994, 236), Floridi (2002, 80–4).

¹³See Schmitt (1983, 227), Porro (1994, 242–51), Grellard (2004, 114–5).

¹⁴See Gregory (1974, 1984), Perler (2010a).

Academic skeptic.¹⁵ In any case, it is plain that there were no full-blown or radical skeptics advocating universal suspension of judgment or denying the possibility of knowledge. In general, although some thinkers adopted what might be deemed a skeptical position on certain specific issues, when skepticism was the object of discussion, in most cases the aim was to refute it.¹⁶ In addition, such refutations were not produced in the context of a serious skeptical crisis, unlike what later occurred in the modern period. It must be noted, in this connection, that it has recently been claimed that an important number of medieval authors made a methodological use of skeptical arguments. This use consisted in employing them either to undermine a given conception of knowledge which was then replaced by another one immune to the challenges posed by those arguments, or to distinguish between types of knowledge and to determine the kind of certainty proper to each of them.¹⁷ In the Middle Ages, skepticism seems to have been a logical construction independent for the most part of the historical skeptical movement, which is why it was understood as a reservoir of arguments to the effect that knowledge is impossible.¹⁸ In this respect, the medieval conception of skepticism does not seem to differ much from the way skepticism is generally conceived of in contemporary analytic epistemology.

In sum, the role played by Pyrrhonism in Western medieval thought was both minor in relation to other forms of skepticism and insignificant in comparison with the part it has had in both modern and contemporary philosophical discussions.

The present collection falls into three parts, the first focusing on ancient Pyrrhonism, the second addressing its influence on modern philosophy, and the third dealing with the Pyrrhonian stance in relation to contemporary analytic philosophy. While the approach taken in the third part is, as expected, mainly systematic, some of the essays on ancient and modern Pyrrhonism combine historical and exegetical analysis with an assessment of the philosophical merits of the Pyrrhonian outlook. It should be noted that this collection does not aim to provide a comprehensive discussion of Pyrrhonism in ancient, modern, and contemporary philosophy. Rather, its goal is to open up stimulating new exegetical and philosophical perspectives on Pyrrhonian skepticism and to motivate further examination of certain issues.

Richard Bett opens the first part by examining a facet of the practical nature of ancient Pyrrhonism. As has frequently been noted, one of the aspects which differentiate it from the various forms of contemporary skepticism is that the Pyrrhonist does not view his philosophy as a merely theoretical stance with no implications for his life, but rather regards it as an *ἀγωγή* or way of living. This practical character does not consist solely in the assumption that it is possible to live one's Pyrrhonism, but also in the thought that the Pyrrhonist, by virtue of his skepticism, is better off

¹⁵On the skepticism of John of Salisbury, see Grellard (2007b).

¹⁶See, e.g., Grellard (2004) for a taxonomy of the thirteenth-century strategies against the skeptical argument based on the illusion of the senses.

¹⁷This view is fully advanced by Perler (2010b); cf. Grellard (2004, 128–9; 2007a, 342). Whether an author felt the need to refute a skeptical argument or merely made a methodological use of it seems to be, in principle, hard to determine with precision.

¹⁸See Grellard (2004, 113; 2007a, 328).

than other people. Bett's contribution focuses on an aspect of this further claim. Granting for the sake of argument that Pyrrhonism is livable, he asks whether the type of values the Pyrrhonian life includes and the adherence to them it allows make such a life ethically acceptable and desirable for us. He thinks they do not, since the Pyrrhonist's lack of commitment to the moral values that form part of his society's laws and customs and the passivity shown in his practical decisions reveal that he is not an ethically engaged agent.

Next, Svavar Hrafn Svavarsson offers an original interpretation of the notion of ἀταραξία (undisturbedness or tranquility) in Sextus' account of Pyrrhonism. In the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus tells us that the reason the proto-Pyrrhonist began to philosophize was his hope of becoming undisturbed by resolving the disagreement among appearances, i.e., by determining which are true and which are false. Being unable to resolve it, due to the equipollence of the conflicting appearances, he suspended judgment. To his surprise, by doing so he became undisturbed in matters of belief. Svavarsson argues that, although Sextus often suggests that the skeptic's undisturbedness comes about through his not having beliefs of any kind, in his explicit explanation of skeptical undisturbedness he claims that it comes about only through not having positive beliefs about natural values. Hence there are two notions of undisturbedness at play in Sextus' account of Pyrrhonism.

Katja Vogt's essay examines a subject which has recently been a focus of much attention among scholars, namely, the nature of the investigation conducted by the Pyrrhonist. One common objection raised against his investigation is that it cannot be deemed genuine investigation, since it does not aim at the discovery of the truth. Rather, what the Pyrrhonist searches for is the attainment of the state of undisturbedness. Vogt argues that this objection is based on the questionable view that the sole goal of investigation is the discovery of the truth. This overlooks that there are other aims which philosophers strive for in their investigations, fails to distinguish between the motivational basis of philosophical investigation and its goals, and ignores that philosophical inquiry guided by the value of truth may not be immediately aimed at the attainment of the truth but rather at the avoidance of falsehoods. These three points are to be taken into account when trying to understand the Pyrrhonian sort of investigation.

For its part, my contribution explores whether the Sextan Pyrrhonist is committed to the law or principle of non-contradiction, a topic which has not received much attention among students of ancient Pyrrhonism. Although there are passages of Sextus' oeuvre which seem to show that the Pyrrhonist endorses that law, I argue that he actually suspends judgment about the truth of its different dogmatic formulations. However, this does not preclude him from following, without any conviction as to their correctness, certain qualified versions of that law when thinking and acting, even though he would not present these as versions of a *law* or *principle*. I also claim that the Pyrrhonist makes use of the dogmatic versions of the principle of non-contradiction only dialectically. Finally, after showing that both the uncommitted observance of qualified versions of that principle and the dialectical use of its dogmatic formulations are in agreement with other aspects of the Pyrrhonist's philosophy, I explore whether he is an anti-rationalist.

Peter Klein focuses on two of the so-called Five Modes of Agrippa, namely, the mode deriving from regress *ad infinitum* and the mode based on reciprocity. He maintains that, in keeping with his characteristic dialectical argumentation, the Pyrrhonist takes the premises employed in those modes from Aristotle's foundationalist conception of justification. This epistemological theory was the predominant one in Sextus' time and continues to play an important role in contemporary foundationalism. However, the fact that the Pyrrhonist's regress argument as well as his reciprocal mode work with a particular conception of epistemic justification significantly restricts both their generality and their power. For there are alternative theories – namely, contemporary infinitism and coherentism – which conceive of epistemic warrant in such a way that they reject some of the assumptions of the foundationalist conception of justification, and which therefore accept that regress and reciprocal arguments can produce conclusions which are epistemically justified. After some vacillation, Klein's paper has been placed in the first part. The reason is that, even though his purpose is to critically examine the epistemological presuppositions of Agrippa's trilemma using the tools of contemporary analytic philosophy, he deals at great length with Sextus' account of the Agrippan modes and Aristotle's foundationalist epistemology. His essay is a paradigmatic case of ancient texts being approached from the perspective, not of a classical philosophy scholar, but of a contemporary epistemologist concerned with assessing various theories of justification.

The second part of the volume, devoted to Pyrrhonism in modern philosophy, includes four papers dealing with the outlooks that Francis Bacon, Pierre Bayle, and David Hume adopted towards Pyrrhonism and skepticism in general. These essays take account of the specialized literature of the past decades and offer new interpretations, thus advancing the study of the presence of Pyrrhonian skepticism in modern thought.

Bacon's relation to skepticism has not attracted much attention from specialists, and hence the presence of Pyrrhonian elements in his philosophy has not been thoroughly studied. Accordingly, Luiz Eva's essay represents an important addition to the literature and will arouse further interest in exploring the role played by skepticism in the thought of the author of the *Novum Organum*. Bacon recognizes some important similarities between skepticism and his own philosophy, especially the skeptic's emphasis on the weakness of our cognitive faculties and his suspension of judgment. But there is also a key difference: although both affirm the impossibility of knowledge, the skeptic claims that nothing can be known *tout court*, whereas Bacon contends that this is the case only as far as the traditional way of attaining knowledge is concerned. Eva proposes to examine the affinities and differences between Bacon's philosophy and ancient skepticism, both Pyrrhonian and Academic, by focusing on a comparison between his doctrine of the idols and the arguments and themes found in the ancient and contemporary skeptical sources (in particular Montaigne's *Essais*) which he presumably read.

It has sometimes been said that, for any given claim made by Pierre Bayle somewhere in his oeuvre, it is possible to find a refutation of it somewhere else. Centering his analysis on Bayle's *Commentaire philosophique*, John Christian

Laursen examines the presence in this work of both arguments which purport to establish rationally the necessity of toleration and arguments which, by contrast, undermine reason's capacity to ground toleration. These latter are Bayle's famous arguments about the conscientious persecutor and the overwhelming force of custom and education. Laursen analyzes in detail the tension between the two kinds of argument, demonstrating that neither side wins and that Bayle finally turns to rhetoric to justify toleration. He thus takes issue with recent interpretations of the *Commentaire philosophique* which, ignoring or dismissing the arguments that undermine the reliability of reason in matters of toleration, maintain that Bayle's position in that work is wholly rationalist. Laursen's paper is therefore an important contribution to the more general debate about whether Bayle was a rationalist or a Pyrrhonian skeptic.

Hume's stance on Pyrrhonism, and on skepticism in general, is probably more complex than that of any other modern thinker, with the possible exception of Bayle. Due to this complexity, two essays are devoted to a careful examination of his skepticism, tackling both his overt disparaging attitude towards (what he took to be) Pyrrhonian skepticism and the philosophical connection between his own skepticism and the Pyrrhonist's. Although Hume's relation to skepticism has received considerable attention from scholars, these two essays provide fresh insights. In the first of them, Peter Fosl considers an at least apparent incoherence on the part of both the Pyrrhonist and Hume, namely, their appeal to nature. For it seems that skeptics should refrain from claiming to have understood nature, from making prescriptive or normative assertions based on the notion of nature, and in general from espousing any form of naturalism. Fosl analyzes the Humean conception of nature, arguing that it is characteristically skeptical and that, in Hume, skepticism should be understood, not as a theory, but as a non-dogmatic way of addressing theory. This is much in line with the ancient Pyrrhonist's outlook, even if the similarity may be only accidental. In this connection, Fosl thoroughly explores whether Sextus' texts were available to Hume and, if so, whether he read them and was influenced by them. He also considers in depth the similarities and differences between Hume's stance and the ancient forms of skepticism, and examines to what extent one can characterize his skepticism as either Academic or Pyrrhonian.

For his part, Plínio Junqueira Smith explores in detail Hume's treatment of skeptical arguments. On the one hand, there is Hume's distinction between two types of such arguments, namely, popular or weak and philosophical or strong skeptical arguments. On the other, there is the difference between two uses of these arguments, no matter whether they are weak or strong: the Pyrrhonist utilizes them to suspend judgment, whereas the Academic employs them both to restrict our inquiries to what is within the scope of our understanding and to show that we only have probable knowledge and beliefs. Hume only accepts the latter use, because it is impossible to abolish all belief as Pyrrhonists intend to do.

Present-day epistemological discussions of skepticism have mainly focused on so-called Cartesian skepticism – i.e., the view that knowledge in general, or at least regarding a very large area, is impossible. This view, which amounts to the one Sextus ascribes to the Academics Carneades and Clitomachus, differs from Pyrrhonism in both its formulation and its scope. First, the Pyrrhonist does not deny

the possibility of ever attaining knowledge, but suspends judgment about whether or not knowledge is impossible, restricting himself to saying that up till now he has been unable to affirm that anyone knows anything. Second, he does not merely call into question our knowledge-claims, but also casts doubt on whether we are in fact justified in preferring any one of our beliefs to its opposite.¹⁹ This more radical and subtler form of skepticism has more and more been attracting the attention of epistemologists, and the three essays included in the third part of the volume are the result of careful study of the Pyrrhonian outlook in connection with contemporary analytic philosophy. They deal with the relationship between Wittgenstein's thought and Pyrrhonism, the challenges posed by the Agrippan modes to contemporary theories of knowledge and justification, and the question of whether Pyrrhonism is livable.

In the first essay, Duncan Pritchard explores Wittgenstein's radical new conception of the structure of reasons put forward in his posthumously published *On Certainty*. According to such a conception, all belief-systems require the existence of fundamental "hinge" propositions which are held to be most certain, but which can be neither rationally doubted nor rationally supported. Pritchard claims that this account of the structure of reasons gives rise to a type of restricted skepticism which bears significant similarities with the Pyrrhonian outlook. This is why he thinks one can legitimately characterize that kind of skepticism as "Wittgensteinian Pyrrhonism."

In present-day epistemological discussions, the problem of disagreement has lately regained part of the special relevance it has in Sextus' account of Pyrrhonism. Thinking that the philosophical import of this problem has not been fully appreciated yet, Markus Lammenranta proposes to offer, on the basis of Sextus' exposition of the modes of suspension of judgment and from the perspective of analytic epistemology, a reconstruction of the argument based on disagreement. He contends that this reconstruction provides us with a serious "skeptical paradox" which must be taken into careful consideration by modern-day theories of knowledge and justification. He reviews the epistemological theories of foundationalism, contextualism, coherentism, reliabilism and evidentialism, and claims that they all fail to satisfactorily respond to the Pyrrhonian argument from disagreement.

Probably the most vexed question regarding ancient Pyrrhonism concerns the scope of ἐποχή, namely, whether it is limited to philosophico-scientific beliefs or extends also to ordinary or common-sense beliefs. The vigorous debate among specialists about whether the Pyrrhonist disavows all, or only some, beliefs has been couched in different terms, e.g., whether his skepticism is "rustic" or "urbane," and whether or not all of his appearance-statements are "non-epistemic," "non-doxastic," or "non-judgmental."²⁰ This issue is intimately related to the

¹⁹The view, commonly accepted by scholars, that Pyrrhonism differs from Cartesian skepticism in that it does not merely call into question knowledge-claims but beliefs in general is rejected by Brennan (1999).

²⁰The classic papers on this question are the five essays collected in Burnyeat and Frede (1997). See also Glidden (1983), Stough (1984), Barney (1992), Brennan (1999), Fine (2000), Bailey (2002, [chapters 7–9](#), 11), Thorsrud (2009, [chapter 9](#)), and Perin (2010).

long-standing charge that the Pyrrhonist is reduced to inactivity because action requires belief (the famous ἀπρᾶξιᾶ objection). If he advocates a moderate skepticism, then the charge seems easily answerable, while if his skepticism is radical, he is required to explain how action is possible in the absence of all beliefs. Juan Comesaña's essay takes up this complex question, not from a historical perspective, but from an exclusively philosophical one. His purpose is to determine whether the urbane and the rustic Pyrrhonists' replies to the inactivity charge are theoretically acceptable. In his view, the rustic Pyrrhonist cannot successfully respond to the objection because it is plain that action does require belief. The urbane Pyrrhonist therefore seems in a better position. So Comesaña examines both whether this type of Pyrrhonist can respond to the charge by using traditional resources and whether the contemporary theories of contextualism and contrastivism can help him offer a philosophically satisfactory or plausible answer. His final verdict is negative.

We hope this volume will contribute not only to further showing that Pyrrhonism has played a crucial role in the history of philosophy since Antiquity, but also to highlighting the philosophical import of this brand of skepticism.

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