

CARTESIAN HUMILITY AND PYRRHONIAN PASSIVITY: THE ETHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF EPISTEMIC AGENCY

Modesto GÓMEZ-ALONSO

ABSTRACT: While the Academic sceptics followed the plausible as a criterion of truth and guided their practice by a doxastic norm, so thinking that agential performances are actions for which the agent assumes responsibility, the Pyrrhonists did not accept rational belief-management, dispensing with judgment in empirical matters. In this sense, the Pyrrhonian Sceptic described himself as not acting in any robust sense of the notion, or as 'acting' out of sub-personal and social mechanisms. The important point is that the Pyrrhonian advocacy of a minimal conception of 'belief' was motivated by ethical concerns: avoiding any sort of commitment, he attempted to preserve his peace of mind. In this article, I argue for a Cartesian model of rational guidance that, in line with some current versions of an agential virtue epistemology, does involve judgment and risk, and thus which is true both to our rational constitution and to our finite and fallible nature. Insofar as epistemic humility is a *virtue of rational agents* that recognise the limits of their judgments, Pyrrhonian scepticism, and *a fortiori* any variety of naturalism, is unable to accommodate this virtue. This means that, in contrast to the Cartesian model, the Pyrrhonist does not provide a satisfactory answer to the problem of *cognitive disintegration*. The Pyrrhonist thus becomes a social rebel, one that violates the norm of *serious personal assent* that enables the flourishing of a collaborative and social species which depends on agents that, however fallible, are accountable for their actions and judgments.

KEYWORDS: intellectual humility, epistemic agency, Pyrrhonism, René Descartes, virtue epistemology

In this paper I argue that, despite regarding openmindedness as the distinctive virtue of sceptical enquirers, the Pyrrhonians were unable to provide the proper epistemic framework to accommodate such a virtue. On the one hand, their investigations were guided by pragmatic motivations such that they remove both cognitive competences and openmindedness. On the other hand, they failed to ground a relation of strict entailment between a theoretical and a normative

scepticism, in such a way that knowledge and rational belief stand or fall together, and thus, they failed in the task of dispensing with judgmental beliefs and of describing activity as a natural process that does not require of a monitoring subject. Curiously, instead of preventing a radical divorce between the subject and his actions, the Pyrrhonian cure of passivity severely intensified it. This is why I argue for a Cartesian model of rational guidance where the norm of judging to the best and the virtue of intellectual humility are logically interrelated, a model that, far from applying the norm of certainty to empirical judgments, it conceives humility as the proper attitude of human agents that, in order to be true to their rational natures, have to judge to the best of their powers, but that, recognizing the limited nature of those powers, have to come to terms with the fact that the exercise of agency is compatible with failure.

In section 1, I will introduce an instrumental conception of scepticism, such that sceptical arguments are seen as means to clear the mind of preconceptions and to achieve a state of mind proper to receiving philosophical clarification, and contrast this conception with the Pyrrhonian positive and ethical description of scepticism. In section 2, I present what I take to be the strongest case for the Pyrrhonian, arguing that the Pyrrhonian distinction between two kinds of assent is *prima facie* able to answer the *apraxia challenge*, and analysing the Pyrrhonian diagnosis of epistemic regret and cognitive disintegration. In section 3, a detailed critique is mounted of some fundamental aspects of Pyrrhonism. In section 4, intellectual humility is located within a Cartesian framework. Finally, the Appendix explores some deep affinities between Descartes' conception of rational agency and Sosa's view on the same issue. The overarching theses are that no variety of naturalism is able to accommodate intellectual humility, and that epistemic remorse and cognitive disintegration can only be overcome when action is guided by rational considerations, however minimal and impaired by external circumstances such as urgency, lack of veridical information or unfriendly scenarios.

1. Freedom from Doubt

Consider the following remark, which Wittgenstein makes in *On Certainty*:

I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again "I know that that's a tree", pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else arrives and hears this, and I tell him: "This fellow isn't insane. We are only doing philosophy."¹

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), § 467.

This piece of savage comic humour in which philosophy becomes the brunt of Wittgenstein's sarcasm is also (as the use of 'we' makes clear) an appalling example of self-fustigation that manifests how tormented was Wittgenstein by philosophical problems.

The meaning of this remark is, however, deeper and more general. Wittgenstein is not only making fun of himself, but shifting our attention to an *attitude* or *habit of mind* which is characteristically philosophical, that of obstinately *asserting platitudes* "of such a kind that it is difficult to imagine *why* anyone should believe the contrary,"² as if by means of mere repetition the philosopher would be casting a spell to ward off possibilities which might "plunge (*them*) into chaos."³ Insofar as the philosopher is "bewitched"⁴ by those trivialities, and that his attitude is at odds with 'healthy' common sense, his practice is both analogous to the sceptical habit of doubting the indubitable and to the religious habit of believing the incredible. For all the three cases, the common target is the illness of *anxiety*, and the common goal, a way of life free from the anxieties of an *uncertainty* that reflection raises and that reflection seems unable to appease.

One could be tempted to overemphasize Wittgenstein's gloomiest moments, and so to interpret his variety of anti-philosophical philosophy as a way of cleansing the philosopher's habit of mind. On this reading, Wittgenstein's inability to stop doing philosophy⁵ was nothing else than the personal tragedy of a man that sinks beneath a burden that he can neither bear nor cast away.

This view does not answer, however, to the general impression that we receive from at least *On Certainty*. On the one hand, Wittgenstein steadfastly sticks to epistemic platitudes of a certain sort (the so-called 'hinge-propositions') whose revision "would amount to annihilation of all yardsticks,"⁶ accusing Moore, not of philosophical obsession, but of treating hinges as if they were empirical propositions⁷ that emerge "from some kind of ratiocination."⁸ On the other hand, self-doubting is a constitutive part of *transformative* and *therapeutical* processes where the subject explicitly dissociates himself from compulsions and inclinations of some kind or another, and where he has to muster all his intellectual and volitional resources to prevent relapsing into habitual opinions that keep coming

² *Ibid.*, § 93.

³ *Ibid.*, § 613.

⁴ *Ibid.*, § 31.

⁵ See Rush Rhees, *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 261-262.

⁶ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 692.

⁷ See *Ibid.*, § 136.

⁸ *Ibid.*, § 475.

back, capturing his beliefs.⁹ In this respect, it is not too difficult both to see that, in *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein struggles to resist the *natural* pull of what Duncan Pritchard aptly calls “the universality of rational evaluation,”¹⁰ namely, of understanding hinges as rationally supported and justified, and so as on the same spectrum as empirical propositions, and to appreciate the critical role played by sceptical arguments to break this pull and to clear the mind of preconceptions. Certainly, by Wittgenstein’s lights, the Sceptic makes the same mistake as Moore. But, unlike the latter, his very destructive results disclose the *arational* status of hinges. On a dialectical and parasitical reading of scepticism, the Sceptic, instead of sharing Moore’s presuppositions, draws the unwanted conclusions implicit in the latter’s assumptions.¹¹

According to the picture that emerges from the previous remarks the *source of anxiety* is some sort of attitude, normative drive, compulsion or prejudice so deeply entrenched in our ordinary nature and in our quotidian practices that its cure requires us, by means of *externalizing* this deep-seated aspect, to direct our will in the opposite direction. The Pyrrhonians identified that source as our natural tendencies to belief and commitment, inclinations that, making of the philosophically untrained a victim of unfounded dogmatism, double his troubles and make of him the subject of perturbation. Descartes saw it as a pre-philosophical state of untutored reason, rash precipitation, opinionated judgment, and compulsive passion associated for him with childhood and infirmity. Wittgenstein described the source of disquiet as the hold of unconscious pictures which, deeply ingrained in our thinking and petrified in our language, function as norms of representation and exclude alternative possibilities. Under the thrall of those imperative models, the human being of common sense is ripe for dogmatism.

⁹ See René Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume II*, eds. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 15.

¹⁰ Duncan Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst. Radical Skepticism and the Groundlessness of Our Believing* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3.

¹¹ This means that a *theoretical scepticism*—the view that there are no rational grounds for our basic commitments—does not entail a *normative scepticism* according to which we should not assent to those commitments. One could be a theoretical sceptic without recommending suspension of assent, either because, offset by our natural inclinations, that recommendation would be idle (Hume), or because the doxastic norms governing empirical beliefs do not apply to hinges (Wittgenstein), or because, although falling short of strict knowledge, some propositions are more likely true than their negations (Academic Sceptics).

Notice that on this view philosophical dogmatism is on the spectrum of ordinary attitudes, and so that, while on the first order the philosopher of common sense (whether of a Moorean or of an Aristotelian streak) acts as the spokesman and the organizer of common nature, on the meta-order philosophical and common views share epistemological principles as generally hold as deeply mistaken. In this sense, the main goal of therapeutical philosophies such as those of Descartes and Wittgenstein is to expose and replace those meta-epistemological principles that the human being of common sense unreflectively endorses and that the philosopher of common sense prematurely reifies.

Notice too that *theoretical scepticism* is both the natural offspring of common sense's commitments and an indispensable laxative.

Insofar as the dogmatic is always concealing a secret doubt, while the anxieties that assault his mind are 'anxieties of uncertainty,' the Sceptic isolates and exacerbates that concealed doubt in order to make it explicit, so as to break the hold of downright complacency. Bringing to the open the pervasiveness of doubt, the Sceptic aggravates the disquiet. Disclosing that the very core of our epistemic practices is poisoned by sceptical paradoxes, he manages to substitute philosophical scepticism for philosophical dogmatism at the front and centre of common sense, swapping an assertive for a humble attitude. He offers a *cure of humility* that could be easily interpreted as the main way to achieve the *state of mind* proper to receive philosophical (or religious) clarification. The important point is, however, that *therapeutical philosophies*, either of a Cartesian or of a Wittgensteinian streak, are grafted on sceptical procedures and conclusions that, as in a mirror darkly, reflect the true substance of our entrenched practices. The sceptical crisis is thus the precondition of philosophical reconstruction.

The problem is that, according to this conception, scepticism is hostage to the same epistemological views distinctive of common sense, so that, even if capable of changing our epistemic attitude, it falls short. It fails to transcend embedded opinions regarding the proper sources of certainty and knowledge, failing thus to secure intellectual quietude. Instead of a cure for uncertainty, sceptical humility would merely be the correct attitude to its ubiquity, or, in the words of Sedley, "a modest sacrifice at the altar of intellectual honesty."¹² Intrinsically constrained to be a *method*, scepticism is on this view unable to be a positive means to, and much less to constitute our freedom. Sceptical humility and openmindedness would thus receive its true meaning and significance from the

¹² David Sedley, "The Motivation of Greek Skepticism," in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 10.

outside, that is to say, from the potential buildings that could be constructed on the debris left by the sceptical flood, having so a very limited intrinsic value.

The trouble is that there is a mismatch between this *instrumental* vision of scepticism and what the real life Sceptics of the Pyrrhonian tradition said about themselves. Pyrrhonian scepticism was governed by an *ethical doctrine* that underlined the *intrinsic value* of suspension of assent and that consistently identified scepticism with the liberated personality, by a sustained effort, conditional to that ethical motivation, of breaking the hold of natural inclinations and common sense assumptions, and by an unmitigated will to provide for sceptical humility (under the name of ‘openmindedness’) a place of honour. There is a truth contained in the methodological approach to scepticism: that, given its parasitical and negative nature, it is very difficult to make sense of the Pyrrhonian positive and ethical claims. However, a charitable reading of Pyrrhonism is opportune, if only because of the fact that a disclosure of the limitations of the sceptical “persuasion”¹³ could shed light on the very limits and possibilities of therapeutical reconstructions of philosophy, and with it on the proper place of humility among the intellectual virtues.

2. Pyrrhonian Therapy

On a popular picture of scepticism famously advanced by Hume, the only cure for the unmitigated Pyrrhonism that thrives in the solitary confines of meditation is the force of nature, against which sceptical arguments are powerless and idle. This means that, by Hume’s lights, the suspension of assent so energetically recommended by the Pyrrhonists cannot be *sustained*, and that *belief* is as natural as unavoidable.

As a charge to scepticism, Hume’s remarks boil down to an updated version of the *apraxia challenge*, which confronts the Sceptic with the task of explaining how his doctrine avoids inconsistency and how his principles do not reduce him to complete inactivity. In any case, the curious thing about Hume’s view of Pyrrhonism is that, as he should perfectly know, it does not fit with the Pyrrhonist’s self-description. After all, the Pyrrhonist is eager to appeal to “the guidance of nature”¹⁴ and to “everyday observances”¹⁵ in order to be *active*, as well as to insist that, insofar as his concerns are *practical* ones, his scepticism is (must be) compatible with his ability to act in the world. It seems clear that Hume

¹³ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, eds. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

missed an essential point of ancient scepticism—the Pyrrhonian distinction between *two kinds of assent or belief*—,¹⁶ a point that, while marking the strong affinities between the Humean and the Pyrrhonian varieties of *naturalism*, helps to clarify why the Pyrrhonist is able to endorse an unmitigated withholding without compromising his active life.

In a strong sense, beliefs are for the Pyrrhonist equivalent to doxastic attitudes that involve taking any given proposition as true (or false) to reality, as representing (or misrepresenting) how things *really* are in themselves. Dogmatic beliefs are *not* mechanical dispositions responsive to causal and sub-personal processes. Supported by reasons, they exhibit a normative and epistemic character, and so they are *judgments* endorsed by the agent at a reflective level for which he is responsible and accountable. Following the Stoic's model, the Pyrrhonists recognized three varieties of judgments: *opinions* (fallible judgments), *cognitions* (infallible judgments comparable with Descartes' moral certainties), and *understandings* (infallible judgments mutually and logically related within a system of science). Dogmatic beliefs being alethic affirmations that involve the endeavour to get it right on whether p on the part of the agent, they amount to what Sosa calls “judgmental beliefs.”¹⁷ Unlike what happens with the second (and minimal) notion of belief analysed by the Pyrrhonians, judgmental beliefs are under the (indirect) control of the subject, being in our power to break their hold and to bring them to suspension. It goes without saying that judgmental beliefs are the target of the Pyrrhonian therapy, and so that they have to be eradicated in order to overcome epistemic disturbance. In this sense, there is no difference between probable opinions and *akataleptic* (apprehensive) impressions: liberation means for the Sceptic liberation from any sort of judgment and commitment, whether weak or strong. Notice, moreover, that the combined facts that judgmental beliefs are (i) (indirectly) voluntary, (ii) that they are *responsive to reasons*, and (iii) that they do not exhaust the scope of belief, help to explain how suspension of assent can be sustained, becoming so a *permanent frame of mind for the Sceptic*: again and again the Pyrrhonist appeals to counterpoising arguments in order to avoid relapsing into dogmatic attitudes, in such a way that the sceptical dialectical gymnastics is comparable with the Wittgensteinian procedure of assembling reminders.

In contrast to judgmental beliefs, *approvals* are assents “in accordance with a passive appearance,”¹⁸ beliefs in the limiting sense of *forced and undogmatic*

¹⁶ See *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷ Ernest Sosa, *Judgment and Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 52.

¹⁸ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines*, 19.

natural beliefs. Forced, because it is not in our power to suspend those psychological inclinations. Undogmatic, because, instead of dealing with how things really are, they deal with how they appear to be, released of any sort of alethic emphasis. Natural, insofar as they are non-reflective and spontaneous compulsions that make it possible for the Sceptic to go “*through the motions* of ordinary life.”¹⁹ The important points to note are that, for the Pyrrhonist, it makes no sense to get rid of those compulsive drives; that, since they are not a guide to truth, and the only role they play is a *functional* and sub-personal role in the welfare of the individual, approvals are understood on the model of *sensations*; and that, in order to avoid the charge of inconsistency, the Pyrrhonian provides a complete reconstruction of our judgments, higher-level as well as lower-level, perceptual as well as mnemonic and rational, in terms of *appearances*, in such a way that rational deliverances are construed by him as non-epistemic seemings. If correct, the latter strategy could help the Sceptic to effectively deal with the charges of self-annihilation and of being hostage to the same epistemological views of dogmatic common sense.

And this brings us to the nub of the question. Granted that the Sceptic can lead an active life without judgmental beliefs, why is he so eager to recommend such a conformist life deprived of convictions, to propose a participation in the ordinary life that falls short of a *full identification*, and that makes of the Pyrrhonist, according to the felicitous expression coined by Terence Penelhum, a man *in* the ordinary world, but not *of* it,²⁰ one that conforms to, but who does not endorse, common practice?

The stock-in-trade answer that the Pyrrhonian gives to this question is that, while the Sceptics are “disturbed by things which are forced upon them,”²¹ ordinary people are affected “by two sets of circumstances:”²² by the feelings they suffer, and by the beliefs that, attending to them, plague their minds as well as their bodies. It is interesting to note that, in a characteristic twist of the doctrines of the Stoa,²³ Sextus, instead of promising to the philosophically enlightened the

¹⁹ Katja Maria Vogt, “Scepticism and Action,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 171.

²⁰ See Terence Penelhum, “Skepticism and Fideism,” in *The Skeptical Tradition*, ed. Myles Burnyeat (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 292.

²¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines*, 29.

²² *Ibid.*, 30.

²³ As Katja Maria Vogt forcefully argues, it is a common feature of Ancient Pyrrhonists to turn fundamental aspects of the Stoic’s theory upside down, endorsing notions that would be nonsensical for the Stoic (forced assent, undogmatic belief, moderate *ataraxia*...), and so

ideal of imperturbability, talks about “tranquillity in matters of opinion and moderation of feeling in matters forced upon us.”²⁴ This means that the Pyrrhonist cannot help, say, feeling a physical pain or suffering a psychological disturbance. But that it is up to him to get rid of those beliefs that, dilating the power of the imagination and suggesting a metaphysical dimension working in the world of individual misfortune, compound our suffering.

In my opinion, what the Pyrrhonians seem to have in mind when talking about beliefs that double our troubles are phenomena related to *moral guilt*, such as interpreting misfortune and physical discomfort as the results of deeds ascribable to the free agency of the individual, and to a (possible) *psychological disintegration* due to the conflict between whatever feelings arise in the individual from demands of his body, and the judgments of value that he is inclined to make on reflection. In this regard, it is not very difficult to appreciate how, looking through the eyes of the Pyrrhonist, the Stoic sage turns from being all in one piece to illustrate an unbridgeable divorce between animal pain and the rational prescription (that he endorses) of making of all happenings his *own will*. By the lights of the Sceptic, this conflict cannot be solved, but *dissolved*: his therapy is thus a *cure of passivity* that avoids disintegration at the cost of dispensing with any sort of rational judgment and rational agency.

Notice, however, that the Pyrrhonian extends the phenomenon of psychological disintegration from paradigm cases of metaphysical dissociation to any kind of reflective dissociation whatsoever, so that the borderline between judgmental beliefs and passive approvals is not, on his view, tantamount to the frontier separating philosophical inquiry and common sense. This means that the Sceptic is not only worried about metaphysical afflictions, and that his therapy equally applies to practical judgments innocent of theorizing.

What practical judgments bring to the open is *epistemic regret*, a sort of disturbance whose source is the *disparity between our thoughts and their results*, the indeterminate character of our epistemic achievements, which, no matter how well we comply with rational norms of justification, can never be secured by reflection. Torn apart by normative commands that oblige him to be fully responsible for his beliefs (and fully creditable for their success) and by his awareness of how *epistemic luck* permeates all his performances, the agent fluctuates between an *abstention from action* that results from his inability to reach a definite conclusion, and an *epistemic remorse* that, whether his

mocking the high ideals and the unrestricted standards of knowledge and wisdom advanced by their opponents (see Vogt, “Scepticism and Action,” 174-175).

²⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines*, 25.

performances are successful or not, stems from his conviction that, wanting absolute certainty, all our beliefs (and all our actions) are irresponsible, that *acting* is never *acting well* enough. Eradicating judgments and dispensing with rational imperatives, the Pyrrhonian unshackles his practice from that double jeopardy, gaining peace while catching his opponents in their own net of irresolution and inactivity. For the Pyrrhonian, *to be active* is incompatible with *performing actions regulated by rational desiderata and reflective standards*. Insofar as reflection prevents action, and that activity is a natural process that does not require of a monitoring subject, the Pyrrhonian turns the paralysis charge against his opponents. For him, action (practice within a natural and cultural form of life) takes care of itself.

However, passivity is not only the end of the Pyrrhonian's toils. It is also constitutive of the *means* he employs to reach happiness. After all, suspension of judgment is not the result of a normative use of reason and of free reflection, but a *passive experience* that is the product of the equipollence of arguments. Understood as seemings, the deliverances of reasoning are deprived of their epistemic status. The Pyrrhonian is thus able to effectively confront the charge of becoming an agent in order to get rid of agency, or, in other words, of endorsing in his methodological moment the same commitments whose abolishment gives its meaning to the method itself. It is not a surprise that, in an image that came to be part of philosophical common lore, Sextus compared sceptical arguments with a ladder that he "overturns with his foot"²⁵ once his thesis has been established, and that for the Sceptic there was no problem in engaging in philosophy to get rid of philosophy.

The problem is that, if we take the Pyrrhonist at his word, his project of externalizing belief comes to be a project of *complete externalization*, by which the Sceptic detaches himself from his animal as well as from his rational nature. At the very least, this makes it quite difficult to see how to ascribe to him any (intellectual or ethical) virtue, when there is no *ego* to which attribute it, or when that ego shrinks to the measure of a metaphysical point, or how to apply to him basic norms of assertion such as sincerity, when he does not believe what he says and when he represents 'his' actions as the actions of somebody else, acting as the spokesman of 'his' impulses, 'his' education or 'his' society, and so as always asserting as "the occupier of a role."²⁶

²⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 481.

²⁶ Ernest Sosa, *Knowing Full Well* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), 47.

It seems that, after all, sceptical humility is not a genuine variety of intellectual humility, and that the Pyrrhonist offers as a *bona fide* product something that is closer to the vice of *abjection* than to the virtue of *humility*. This is a symptom that something was terribly wrong in the very principles of the Sceptic's approach to epistemology.

3. Where the Pyrrhonist Goes Wrong

The first thing that I want to observe is that the very intellectual virtue with which the Sceptic differentiates his persuasion, the *openmindedness* proper of a serious and neutral enquirer,²⁷ is empty of content, and so that it is nothing else than a political gesture to make his position attractive.

At the opening of the *Outlines of Scepticism*, Sextus distinguishes himself from positive dogmatists that "have said that they have discovered the truth"²⁸ and from Academics that "have asserted that it cannot be apprehended,"²⁹ claiming that Pyrrhonians are still searching for the truth. However, when coming to define scepticism, he describes it as a dialectical ability "to set out oppositions among things"³⁰ whose leading motivation is suspension of assent, as an argumentative expertise (or virtue) intrinsically directed, not to the truth, but to avoid belief and commitment.

This means that the sceptical inquiry is not an *open* investigation that attempts to discover the truth where the subject endeavours to get it right on whether p, but a policy with a view to *tranquility*, and so that it is a discernible exercise in *wishful thinking* where the Sceptic's *pragmatic* motivation constantly threatens to override relevant evidence. In my view, the frame of mind required to pursue the truth and the Pyrrhonian frame of mind are incompatible, in such a way that, paraphrasing Sosa, the Pyrrhonist's dominant desire removes both his epistemic competence and his openmindedness,³¹ if only because of the fact that, as Descartes perfectly saw, this pragmatic desire makes of the Sceptic's intellectual horizon something miserably close, blinding him to a more radical doubt supported by the very materials he uses, and to the possibility of, pushing sceptical arguments to their very limits, reaching certainties able to refute scepticism. Pragmatic considerations thus prevented the Pyrrhonians from taking their scepticism seriously enough. It was on Descartes to derive from this "very

²⁷ Note that 'Sceptic' and 'enquirer' are cognate words in Greek.

²⁸ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines*, 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

³¹ See Sosa, *Knowing Full Well*, 29.

seriousness”³² those new elements that mark the border between Ancient and Modern philosophy.

All this, however, might apparently co-exist with a positive evaluation of sceptical arguments and conclusions as used *within a non-Pyrrhonian framework where the search for truth is relevant*. I will make three remarks in answer to this possibility.

In the first place, the Pyrrhonian seems guilty of equivocation on the notion of appearance, operating with two incompatible concepts: a restricted notion that, *impervious to reasons and under no control by the rational agent*, it is conceived on the model of *sensations*, and an extended notion that applies to rational operations and deliverances, covering as *seemings* the whole of our deliberative and personal processes. This equivocation points to a general and systematic confusion between reasons and causes, judgments and sensations, compulsions operative at a sub-personal level and rational considerations that impel assent.

We must observe firstly that, by the Pyrrhonist’s lights, approvals are akin to automatic responses to changes in the environment, that they are understood as dispositions triggered by events causally related to our sensorial equipment.³³ However, they are not mere dispositions to act (behavioural dispositions), but dispositions to act intrinsically coupled to *phenomenal inclinations*. Notice, in this sense, the difference between *how the sun appears to me* and the judgment, based on the reports of my sight, as of the small size of the sun.³⁴ The important point is that astronomical reflections are able to change our judgments about the size and the distance of the sun, but that they are incapable to vary appearances. This is what the Pyrrhonian means when saying that appearances are impervious to reasons, and what justifies his drawing such an impenetrable border between approvals (as sensations of sorts) and rational beliefs. The same claim could be paraphrased by saying that for the Pyrrhonians *error is a property of judgments*,

³² Myles Burnyeat, “Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed,” *The Philosophical Review* 91, 1 (1982): 39.

³³ This model applies to approvals responsive to the “guidance of nature,” where the *forced nature* of seemings is both salient and paradigmatic. This does not exclude, however, adaptation and learning, whether as biological organisms or as social beings responsive to cultural inputs. The important points are that, inasmuch as it is not in our power to alter hard-wired appearances, they are instrumental to the Sceptic’s purpose, and that, whether social or natural, acquired or innate, approvals are understood by the Pyrrhonians in terms of blind causality, and not in terms of justification and rational evaluation.

³⁴ See Descartes, “Meditations,” 27.

and that, sensations being non-epistemic, they are not guilty of errors commonly attributed to them.³⁵

Apart from the curious dissimilarity between natural approvals and seemings that result from argumentation, the trouble with the previous account is that the logical subjects of appearance-statements are everyday objects, and so that approvals refer to *propositions* made out of *conceptual contents* resulting from the operation of the intellectual and recognitional capabilities of the individual. That is a far cry from passive sensations, so that the Pyrrhonian seems trapped in a dilemma between abandoning his model, and so relocating approvals in the space of reasons, and sticking to it, at the cost of committing himself to opacity and of depriving his actions of any natural guidance whatsoever.³⁶ In my opinion, the most sensible option for the Sceptic would be to conceive of human sense perception as including two discrete capabilities working in tandem: sensory awareness as well as understanding, and so to incorporate judgments (whether explicit and reflective or embedded from early childhood in our cognitive dispositions) within our natural equipment. On this reading, the pressure on the Sceptic is multiplied. He not only has to explain in which sense rational deliverances are seemings, but he also has to extend that explanation to approvals.³⁷

³⁵ This is common ground for Descartes and the Pyrrhonists. Contrary to some interpretations, Descartes understood sensory misrepresentation in terms of harsh judgments or misleading conceptions that “we form without any reflection in our early childhood” [René Descartes, “Objections and Replies,” in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume II*, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 295] and that we are able to correct.

³⁶ The point is that “It appears to me as if the sun is small” is not a faithful report of the contents of the sensation, but an *interpretation* of those contents that presupposes the operation of highly sophisticated evaluative and recognitional powers.

³⁷ The Pyrrhonian could easily reply to the above objection by pointing out that he accepts that our recognitional powers subserve the formation of beliefs about, for instance, the colours things look, but that both our intellectual sensitivities and the *presentations* resulting from their operations are non-doxastic. In this sense, he would be able to segregate judgments from approvals, the latter being forced and undogmatic assents where the agent, instead of committing himself to the belief that, say, he is holding a dagger, simply claims that he is having an experience *as if* a dagger were in his hands, acting accordingly. The point is that the Pyrrhonian can easily incorporate intellectual powers to his model without thus incorporating judgments, so that he can coherently propose a general suspension of judgment without suspending action. Seemings are prior to and independent of judgments. They are enough to guide common practice.

I do not dispute that presentations [or, borrowing from Sosa, “propositional experience” (Sosa, *Knowing Full Well*, 74-78)] are independent of judgments. What I dispute to the Sceptic is that

The only way for the Pyrrhonian to do it is, in my view, by appealing to the *operative norms* of our cognitive form of life, and by consequently exploiting and *iterating* the gap between those norms and our first-order judgments, in such a way that our practices, as well as the norms regulating them, fall short of their own normative dimension.

The point of that strategy would be to secure that a *higher-order endorsement* of our beliefs could never be obtained. In this sense, what the Sceptic would be putting in question is that we could integrate the contents of our claims and the rules governing them into the very rational perspective that those norms and claims reclaim. On this reading, when saying that all our judgments are seemings, the Sceptic, while also trying to recapture something of the original flavour of forced and passive sensations (after all, rational seemings are imposed on us by the *compelling* character of arguments), confines himself to describe his own reflective lack of position, qualifying (on reflection) his expressions of approval. His sceptical attitude would thus be located on the meta-reflective order, as expressing the mismatch between the results of *pure* reflection and the rational principles guiding action.

There is much to say about this interpretation of Ancient scepticism, if only because it is helpful to explain how Descartes could make a better use of some of the aspects of the 'reheated cabbage' of Pyrrhonism to create a brand-new variety

presentations are non-doxastic, and so that there is a distinction between approvals and judgments. This point can be substantiated by, at least, two considerations: (i) The Pyrrhonian confuses *approvals to seemings* with *approvals understood as seemings*, modelling the difference between approvals and judgments on the distinction between appearance and reality. This error blinds him to the fact that *any kind of approval, whether weak or strong, is responsive to reasons*, and so that the hold of a presentation can be broken (or minimized) and that, since one acts according to his experience as of a dagger only as far as one thinks that such an experience is *veridical*, approvals that guide action are always dogmatic (approvals to the likely truth of *p*). The point is that, instead of postulating two kinds of assent, one should say that there is only *one kind*, but that there are *several degrees* of assent according to probability. It is true that some 'beliefs' are so embedded that it is psychologically impossible to suspend assent on them, but this means neither that we are forced to endorsing them fully nor that their attraction is a non-rational one. (ii) Making compulsive dispositions of approvals, the Sceptic seems forced to describe the ordinary person's endorsements of first-order claims as *not involving meta-epistemic commitments to a strong conception of truth*, namely, as closely related to the sceptical approval to appearances. Apart from being highly controversial (compare, for instance, with the relativist's claim that common sense assertions are epistemically neutral), this claim obliges the Pyrrhonian to reject his own picture of common sense *as plagued by dogmatism*, and so to offer his therapy only to philosophers. On this view, it is far from clear where the roots of judgmental attitudes lie, and also, if those attitudes are unnatural or artificial, how this latter claim could be supported.

of scepticism. However, this should not blind us to the fact that it is far from convincing.

On the one hand, let us observe that, however much it fits with some particular trends within Pyrrhonism, this reading is deeply uncongenial to its main tenets. The Pyrrhonian does not distinguish between higher-order judgments and judgments *tout court*, a point that suggests that, when saying that rational judgments are seemings, he is not meaning that they are seemings in a *derivative* sense, as the result of the philosophical discovery that, reason being incapable of self-validation, our first-order judgments lack an objective status. This point is further substantiated by the Pyrrhonian insistence on locating epistemic disturbance *on the first order*, and consequently by the kind of therapy that he offers, one that, instead of ridding us of epistemological concerns, attempts to eradicate our natural judgments.

On the other hand, consider the *discontinuity* between *theoretical* and *normative* scepticism, between the *norm of certainty* that prevents us from having a secured knowledge and the variety of the *Principle of Underdetermination*³⁸ to which the Pyrrhonian appeals in all his procedures.

As the example of the late Academics makes clear,³⁹ one could consistently claim that high-order knowledge is unattainable, and yet make rational judgments according to probabilities and guide practice by a doxastic norm, so rejecting suspension of assent as the rational attitude to take for many empirical propositions. This is why the normative scepticism endorsed by the Pyrrhonians needs a *perfect equivalence* between judgments in order to suspend commitment. The trouble is that the Pyrrhonist is torn between a theoretical scepticism that could easily make sense of why rational deliverances are seemings, but which is compatible with rational belief, and a normative scepticism that abolishes the rational *attraction* of seemings (as it were, its very force) at the cost of inactivity. As a conclusion, one could say that, since the attraction of seemings is at least in part intellectual, an unmitigated scepticism seriously compromises active life. In any case, there is no entailment from the rejection of knowledge to a general suspension of assent such that all our beliefs would be equally unjustified.

But, in the second place, it is quite important to notice that, even if it is true that knowledge and rational belief stand or fall together, this is a claim that the very materials with which the Pyrrhonist deals prevent him from making.

³⁸ According to the formulation provided by Duncan Pritchard, this principle states that if S knows that p and q describes an incompatible scenario, and yet S lacks a rational basis for preferring p over q, then S lacks knowledge that p (see Pritchard, *Epistemic Angst*, 30).

³⁹ See Vogt, "Scepticism and Action," 167-171.

Pyrrhonism is by its own nature a species of *empirical scepticism*, one that, according to the apt expression coined by Robert Fogelin, attempts to raise radical and unlimited doubts by the only means of “checkable but unchecked defeaters.”⁴⁰ On the one hand, this procedural limitation blinds the Pyrrhonian to the hierarchical structure of our beliefs, preventing him from appreciating the normative role played by hinges “of the form of empirical propositions,”⁴¹ and raising justified concerns about the prospects of supporting by those means a sort of scepticism at least as radical as the Cartesian one. On the other hand, it seems that, deprived of *global scenarios*, the Pyrrhonist is unable to argue for the reduction of any probability, however high, to nothing.⁴² My point is that, inasmuch as they put in question our *basic background assumptions*, only global scenarios are *candidates* to suspend degrees of probability and to debase any judgment to the same level of equality—as equally unjustified—and so that only Cartesian scepticism could *in principle* be able to bridge the gap between theoretical and normative scepticism.

This does not mean, however, that the aforementioned gap is, under closer scrutiny, bridgeable. As Descartes perfectly saw, global scenarios being governed by the same laws of probability ruling all our rational judgments, they are far-fetched, hyperbolic and “metaphysical”⁴³ possibilities, possibilities whose very implausibility is not up to cancel the fact that many empirical claims are “highly probable opinions.”⁴⁴ Contrary to Hume, Descartes did not think that iteration and epistemic ascent to the second order could diminish the probability of our first-order judgments, if only because global scenarios act as regress stoppers and are used by Descartes, not as empirical defeaters that decrease the probability of any item whatsoever *within* the system, but as metaphysical narratives that,

⁴⁰ Robert Fogelin, *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 192.

⁴¹ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 401.

⁴² Compare with the fiasco made by Hume when, in the *Treatise*, he attempted to reduce *by empirical considerations* all knowledge to probabilities, and all probabilities to nothing at all.

⁴³ Descartes, “Meditations,” 25.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 15. This explains why Descartes has to ‘feign’ that all his beliefs are false, deceiving himself about their epistemic weight. Given the context and the objectives of Descartes’ project of acquiring *scientia* and of erecting the building of science on sound grounds, it is perfectly understandable his demanding policy of “pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary.” (*Ibid.*, 15)

For an illuminating analysis of Descartes’ epistemological policy, see Sosa, *Judgment and Agency*, 237-239.

undermining the metaphysical certainty of all our beliefs, leave moral and psychological certainty unscathed.

Descartes' point is very subtle. By ingeniously using a strategy analogous to the Pyrrhonian ladder, he manages to show how global scenarios are *not* on the same spectrum as defeaters that, when making a cognitive claim, one did not consider, and so how, contrary to the appearances, they carry (in a sense of 'probability' that is *internal to the system*) *no probabilistic weight at all*, not even one only enough to make of a maximally probable belief a highly (but not maximally) probable belief.

Take, for example, a paradigmatic perceptual belief, one that could not be doubted by appealing to doppelgänger. It is reasonable to think that, insofar as a global scenario *H* incompatible with the truth of a paradigmatic belief that *p* is conceivable, this very fact diminishes, however slightly, the degree of probability of *p*. The problem is that, the belief that *p* being paradigmatic, it has to stand fast for our rational system not to collapse. This means that, reason being non-optional, and *p* being constitutively attached to our rational system, *p*'s moral certainty is unassailable. One could say that, however possible, global scenarios are unable to shake, even slightly, our first-order *rational conviction*, or, in other words, that the operations of our rational system are insulated from global hypotheses.

Following the preceding view, for Descartes the function played by global scenarios is not that of reducing our conviction, but of helping us to acquire a transcendental and higher-order position from which we could see *as possible* how the power of reason is so external and compulsive as the power of natural compulsions, so stripping moral certainties, not of their rational conviction, but of a normative dimension that gives them an authority higher than intra-rational authority. Descartes' point is that metaphysical uncertainty is compatible with moral or intra-rational certainty, and that, scepticism being metaphysical or transcendental, global scenarios are rational only in the marginal sense of being possible interpretations of the ultimate character of our world *as a whole*, but not in the sense of being relevant alternatives *within* that world.

In short, Descartes considers sceptical scenarios like a ladder that leads to a whole reinterpretation of their own meaning and significance. They leave things as they were before, while overturning our higher-order way of looking at them. The point is that, whether our reason can ultimately be validated or not, rational judgments are not comparable with blind impulses. This is why Descartes is creditable for isolating the norm of metaphysical certainty from the norms that govern rational performances, the quest for invulnerable knowledge from the

investigation of rational action. Descartes improved on the procedures of traditional scepticism. He also relocated scepticism on the second order. It is this latter aspect that makes it possible to combine empirical fallibilism with a project of rationally integrating hinges, to wit, principles of judgment.

And observe, lastly, that the Pyrrhonian cannot even secure a complete *detachment* from all his commitments, that, inasmuch as sooner or later he is doomed to reach a point where his policy of rejection cannot be obeyed,⁴⁵ or where the *falsification thesis*, namely, the possibility of a radical discrepancy between how things really are and what they seem to be, no longer make sense, or where there is such a tight alignment between the understanding and the will that there is no cue to move the will to the opposite direction, he is not going to attain the complete *externalization* that, foreshadowing the libertarian conception of freedom, he conceives as the only means to preserve his free and uncommitted attitude.

The interesting thing is that such points where the hold of unmitigated scepticism is broken are always operations of *intuitive reason*, of an intellectual power that sceptical meditations help us to recognize, to purify, and to develop, and that, unexternalizable, it presents itself, not as an external and coercive force acting on the passive subject, but as a power whose deliverances are imposed upon the agent by himself. When yielding to intuitive reason the subject is yielding to his own power, in such a way that a perfect certainty is the same as a perfect liberty. This means that absent a rational integration of the *principles of judgment*, the latter are, in a certain sense, external. This is why arational approaches to hinges are, in my view, unable to get rid of the bewitchment of scepticism, and so why they are plagued by the same anxieties that, against his best intentions, assail the Sceptic. To be sure, these are *philosophical anxieties*, disquietudes of the meta-reflective mind that are (usually) unable to divorce the ordinary person from his life. Nonetheless, they provoke a feeling of rational irresponsibility that, pointing to a possible discrepancy between Mind and World and between intuitive reason and truth, deprives the mind of its own fulfilment.

The curious thing about the Pyrrhonians is that they made possible *against their will* the discovery of the rational agent, of a rational animal that, however limited in his understanding, is lord of his inner world and stands above the impulses of mere feeling. The very fact that they failed to withdraw themselves fully from the human and rational atmosphere about them, and that their uneasiness was so clearly betrayed by their desperate clinging to a mechanical

⁴⁵ For an interpretation of Descartes' certainties in terms of a failure to act in accordance with his policy of global rejection of beliefs, see Sosa, *Judgment and Agency*, 244.

dialectic, smoothed the path to a model of rational guidance where the norm of *judging to the best* and the virtue of *intellectual humility* are logically interrelated: the Cartesian model.

4. The Position of Intellectual Humility in Descartes' Virtue Epistemology

For a start, let us observe that the 'state of prejudice' that is the target of the Cartesian therapy⁴⁶ is described by Descartes as involving an *implicit epistemology* rooted in several vices, at once intellectual and ethical: (i) a corrupted use of reason that confuses the deliverances of the imagination with the correct functioning of our rational power; (ii) the habit of thinking of deep-rooted opinions as if they were invulnerable principles; (iii) a general blindness to attitudes and beliefs that are subject to control by our wills, and, consequently, a common inclination to take our senses as well as our passions at face value, as evaluations that conform either to the object's true nature or to its true worth, so thinking that one cannot help to believe or to act as one feels impelled to do, and that intellectual and ethical self-restraint are either worthless or accessory to our impulses; and (iv) the conviction that *certainty lies in the senses*, a conviction that for Descartes is salient in explaining the disputes involving irreconcilable differences between the Pyrrhonians and their adversaries,⁴⁷ and that, inasmuch as it leads to intellectual paralysis, Descartes is eager to expunge.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ That the *Meditations* are therapeutical exercises that require of the reader to reproduce *in foro interno* the same processes and experiences 'lived' by the Meditator, in such a way that his mind is completely engaged by the subject matter he considers and that he "make(s) the thing his own and understand(s) it just as perfectly as if he had discovered it by himself" (Descartes, "Objections and Replies," 110), and whose objective is, by means of changing habits as well as opinions, to gain enlightenment, is a point substantiated by Descartes' favouring of the analytical method of exposition, and by his continual appeals, not only to the understanding, but also to the will of his readers. If involved in this process, the readers pass through a maieutical and transformative discipline whose result is a new birth, at once a free and active choice and a passive experience. For an analysis of the Cartesian therapy, see Mike Marlies, "Doubt, Reason, and Cartesian Therapy," in *Descartes. Critical and Interpretative Essays*, ed. Michael K. Hooker (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 87-113. See also David Cunniff, *Argument and Persuasion in Descartes' Meditations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 14-43.

⁴⁷ See René Descartes, "Principles of Philosophy," in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume I*, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 182.

⁴⁸ Descartes describes himself as "the first philosopher ever to overturn the doubts of the sceptics." (Descartes, "Objections and Replies," 376) He grounds this claim in his contribution to making explicit the above category mistake, and thus to expose the overrated epistemological

That certainty lies *solely* in the understanding, namely, that only clear and distinct perceptions of the intellect count as examples of a knowledge invulnerable to metaphysical doubt, it is not only *the positive principle* that permits Descartes to stop radical scepticism, but also a *principle of demarcation* that settles the border between the objects proper to metaphysical certainty and judgments that are by their own nature *defeasible*. As textual evidence internal to Descartes' corpus shows, the former constitute a logical framework that is the intentional object of pure understanding, a set of *contentful norms* that govern, constrain, and make it possible the understanding of particular items, and whose objects are constituted by conceptual webs of necessary and logically interrelated aspects that the mind pulls from within itself and whose validity is *independent* of what empirical facts obtain and of the amount and the quality of the information accessible to the epistemic subject.

Descartes' point is that certainty is *unattainable* beyond this framework, so that the norm of certainty that rules the project of securing and integrating the foundations of knowledge does not apply to *empirical judgments* that neither can be deduced from first principles nor can be governed by any other rule but the law of plausibility.⁴⁹ For Descartes, by the same process through which we acquire metaphysical certainty, we become aware of the *limits* of infallible knowledge. One thus acquires clear and distinct perceptions only against a background of objects whose conception is partial, confused, obscure, and corrigible.

This means that the perfect fitting between the light of the intellect and the inclination of the will which characterizes certainty, and, consequently, that Descartes' recommendation, in *Meditation Four*, for avoiding error, namely, to suspend judgment whenever one does not perceive the truth with clarity and distinctness,⁵⁰ are, respectively, mental states and epistemic rules *operative* solely within the context of a meditative reflection where the mind is conceived by itself and where practical concerns are fully suspended, and so that they do not conform

status commonly conferred to the senses, and to break the hold of the empirical tradition that is the *ground of possibility* for scepticism.

⁴⁹ "But most of our desires extend to matters which do not depend wholly on us or wholly on others, and we must therefore take care to pick out just what depends only on us, so as to limit our desire to that alone. As for the rest, although we must consider their outcome to be wholly fated and immutable, so as to prevent our desire from occupying itself with them, *yet we must not fail to consider the reasons which make them more or less predictable, so as to use these reasons in governing our actions.* [Our emphasis]" René Descartes, "The Passions of the Soul, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume I*, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 380.

⁵⁰ See Descartes, "Meditations," 41.

with the possibilities accessible for an ego substantially united to his body that has to act in order to live, to judge in order to act, and to take decisions either at the brink of the moment or on the basis of inconclusive or unreliable information.

Notice, however, that such a limitation does not entail that similar, if less stringent, rational rules could not guide our actions, and thus that we are forcibly caught in a dilemma between (a) being true to our rational nature at the cost of inactivity (on Descartes' reading of Pyrrhonism, that is the result of the Sceptic's mistake of searching for certainty in the realm of the senses, and, consequently, of making of the norm of certainty the rule governing empirical beliefs)⁵¹, and (b) being false to our rational nature, yielding to the power of the passions and to the way they make things to appear, in order to be active. The empirical analogue of invulnerable certainty is *responsible judgment*, namely, a judgment from which, since it is supported by evidence that speaks to its likely truth, the agent takes at once *care* and *responsibility* (as his own). The empirical analogue for avoiding error is *judging to the best of our powers* in accordance with the circumstances (and the limits imposed by them), and knowing full well that, because luck permeates all our judgments, our thoughts depend on us, but their ends are not ours.

Let us observe that for Descartes the epistemic (and opposed) vices of *prevention* and *precipitation* play an important part in the diagnosis of the sources of cognitive disintegration, as this malady presents itself in practical reasoning. Contrary to the Pyrrhonians, who, bewitched by the opinion that the norm of certainty rules our empirical beliefs, thought of the agent as swinging between inactivity and epistemic remorse, and saw as the *unique* source of his fluctuating condition the natural drive to judgmental beliefs that always fall short of their supposed norm, Descartes describes *two different sources* for the opposite states of *irresolution* and *epistemic repentance*.⁵²

⁵¹ Descartes, "Principles of Philosophy," 182. Descartes's philosophical instincts are sound on this point. The Stoics' dogmatic empiricism acted as the target of Academic and Pyrrhonian arguments, embroiling the latter in the same web of implicit commitments and general assumptions of their opponents. This is an example of a first-order disagreement made possible by a meta-order agreement.

⁵² Descartes distinguishes between *remorse* and *repentance*. The former being "a kind of sadness which results from our doubting that something we are doing, or have done, is good" (Descartes, "Passions," 392), it presupposes doubt. Remorse becomes repentance once we are certain of having acted wrongly. Notice that repentance is the intellectual emotion opposite to *self-satisfaction*, a state of the mind characteristic of the *generous man* that Descartes considers the supreme good, and that he equates to peace of mind and tranquility.

Irresolution is, according to Descartes, “a kind of anxiety”⁵³ that results “from too great a desire to do well” and “from a weakness of the intellect, which contains only a lot of confused notions, and none that are clear and distinct.”⁵⁴ The interesting point about the previous diagnosis is that, although Descartes agrees with the Pyrrhonians in seeing the desire of achieving conclusive arguments and a perfect certainty as the source of irresolution, he segregates that desire, which stems from the intellectual error of thinking that certainty lies in the senses (this is why Descartes emphasizes the role played by clear and distinct perceptions to avoid irresolution: recognizing them involves recognizing at once the limits of metaphysical certainty), from our duty as reflective agents, a duty that is fulfilled “when we do what we judge to be best, even though our judgment may perhaps be a very bad one.”⁵⁵

This account makes it possible for Descartes: (i) to conceive irresolution as a tragedy of unenlightened reflection to which philosophers are especially prone, but that, inasmuch as it is not coupled to the natural impulse to judge, afflicts neither common man nor common nature; (ii) to propose as its remedy the habit “to form certain and determinate judgments regarding everything that comes before us,”⁵⁶ that is to say, a prescription that, unlike the Pyrrhonian one, is both viable and stimulating; and, finally, (iii) to shed light on epistemic remorse in terms of a *common phenomenon* that, instead of resulting from the conflict between the high standards allegedly operative in practical judgment and the imperatives of action (a conflict that could be understood only by a trained epistemologist enthralled by the ideal of indefeasible empirical knowledge), it results from the discord between how we act and how we should act, between our rational duty and our failing to comply with it.

In short, for Descartes, while irresolution is the product of *intellectual delusions*, epistemic regret is the result of qualms that are too real and ordinary for comfort, qualms produced by the clash between our epistemic natural conscience and our unreflective behaviour. Contrary to the Pyrrhonians’ view, repentance is not for Descartes a disturbance that assails the agent, but an anxiety that plagues the mind of those whose action has not been guided by proper rational considerations, however minimal and impaired by external circumstances such as

The previous distinction is not, however, relevant for our purposes. We will refer indistinctly to both emotions.

⁵³ Descartes, “Passions,” 390.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 390-391.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 391.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 391.

urgency, lack of accessible information or unfriendly scenarios.⁵⁷ By Descartes' lights, instead of appeasing anxiety, the Pyrrhonian cure of passivity would severely intensify it. Our nature being rational, the recommendation for passive action and passive belief would amount to the proposal of *being false to ourselves*.

This is why for Descartes the intellectual virtue of *generosity*—that in his technical parlance stands for *openmindedness*—is the supreme virtue to which we can aspire.

Generosity is the human capacity of restraining the power of the passions, and of acquiring a reflective and more objective stance from which to weight the different factors of a situation, and, eventually, to act, not impelled by our feelings, but out of a deliberative process. Let us observe, however, that, far from being a later-day follower of the Stoics, Descartes is fully aware that the passions are an essential ingredient for a fulfilled human life, if only because, directing the subject's attention at the morally important features of a situation and helping to strengthen one's moral belief, they are the emotional counterparts of evaluative judgments, the moorings that make the integration of mind and body possible and that allow the soul to establish unions with the world (which include unions with the agent's beliefs and actions).⁵⁸ The trouble with the passions is that, inasmuch as they tend to overestimate or to underrate the significance of things, they have to be monitored and endorsed by the understanding. Failing this rational control, *which is far from being an eradication of the passions*, we are liable to practical error and, what is most important, to epistemic regret.

⁵⁷ "I think also that there is nothing to repent of when we have done what we judged best at the time when we had to decide to act, even though later, thinking it over at our leisure, we judge that we made a mistake. There would be more ground for repentance if we had acted against our conscience, even though we realized afterwards that we had done better than we thought. For we are responsible only for our thoughts, and it does not belong to human nature to be omniscient, or always to judge as well on the spur of the moment as when there is plenty of time to deliberate." René Descartes, "The Correspondence," in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume III*, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 269.

⁵⁸ Following some cues provided by Byron Williston [see Byron Williston, "The Cartesian Sage and the Problem of Evil," in *Passion and Virtue in Descartes*, eds. Byron Williston and André Gombay (New York: Humanity Books, 2003), 310-311], I would say that for Descartes passions are not spontaneous representations of value that justify evaluative beliefs. On the contrary, the very fact that they are epistemically assessable suggests that they are expressions elicited and justified either by judgments of value or by experiences of pain, discomfort, and so on. This means that for Descartes passions are highly responsive to beliefs and at least partially under the control of rational considerations. In many cases, passions are resistant to rational considerations. But this does not entail that, unlike sensations, they are invulnerable to them.

Consider this latter aspect. For Descartes, no matter how successful our unreflective and passionate actions are, and insofar as we are rationally divorced from them, they are the occasion for a disturbance that prevents our full integration with our lives and with the world. This means that, by his lights, the scruples of our rational nature are the main hindrance to the soul's union with the world and to its own self-contentment as substantially united to the body. For the passions to "become a source of joy,"⁵⁹ they have to be rationally integrated, and so they have to occupy their proper and circumscribed position within our rational life, in such a way that one could not be blamed (specially by oneself) for the failure of one's performances, and that one could only be praised by the only thing that "truly belongs to (*one*),"⁶⁰ namely, one's freedom to dispose one's volitions. Generosity is nothing else than the *experience* and the *exercise of freedom*, and freedom ultimately is the compliance to our rational duty and the subsequent states of virtue and self-esteem. Luck does not separate the agent from himself. Compulsive action does so.

Finally, it is important to notice that Cartesian generosity is intrinsically related to the virtues of *tolerance* and of *intellectual humility*, and that only the humble, open minded and tolerant person is capable to recognize, from his own experience of freedom, the rational and free character of other human beings, so escaping from a theoretical egoism whose sources are compulsion and practical egoism.

On the one side, the old-fashioned and judgmental virtue of tolerance is rooted in the related convictions that, however wrong the opinions of others are, our wrongs are "no less serious than those which others may do,"⁶¹ and that, however right our opinions are, they cannot be forcibly imposed on a rational agent with the capacity to judge by himself and to discover freely and by his own means where the truth lies.⁶² Tolerance is thus a virtue rooted in the experience of our *rational and fallible nature*, so that it includes humility and openmindedness. On the other side, humility is the proper attitude of an agent that, in order to be true to his rational nature, has to judge to the best of his powers, but that,

⁵⁹ Descartes, "Passions," 404.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 384.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 385.

⁶² This explains both Descartes' preference for the analytic method of teaching philosophy and his inclination for therapeutical approaches to philosophy. Dealing with rational agents, the role of the teacher is not to instruct the philosophically untrained, but to let the disciple's reason to take the part of the instructor. It is common both to Descartes' and Wittgenstein's philosophical therapies, to stress that, in order to be cured, the sick soul has to freely agree with the diagnosis (as a matter of fact, he has to make his own diagnosis).

recognizing the limited nature of those powers, has to come to terms with the fact that a judgment can be adroit and inaccurate (or accurate only by accident). The important point is that for Descartes the exercise of epistemic rationality and failure (or good luck) are compatible, and so that freedom and rational agency are not cancelled by the results (that do not belong to us) of our beliefs.

On this view, humility is a constitutive ingredient of generosity, of how it is for human beings to be rational.

Even the blows of an adverse fortune are unable to shake the foundations in which our freedom and our self-contentment are secured.⁶³

Appendix

I would like to concisely underline some deep similarities between Descartes' view and Sosa's version of a virtue epistemology:

(i) For Descartes, as well as for Sosa, the exercise of agency is compatible with failure.

(ii) For both of them, what makes a judgment adroit varies in accordance with the circumstances, in such a way that it is not possible to linguistically elucidate a set of criteria that could be applied in all the cases, actual as well as possible. In this regard, Descartes only points to a subjective criterion—the *internal emotion* of joy⁶⁴ that always is conjoined to a responsible belief (the subjective feeling that one cannot reproach himself for a decision in such and such circumstances)—, and to the cultivation of the virtue of prudence. Given the *invariant* character that this feeling has to Descartes and his appeal to the Aristotelian virtue of prudential evaluation, the Cartesian response might be endorsed by Sosa.

⁶³ Notice that on this model the virtues of self-contentment and humility are not first-order passions that express the value of an object external to the agent, but *internal or intellectual emotions* that represent the right state of the mind, and that can only be acquired by means of an *intellectual second-order therapy* that brings to light the prejudices of untutored common sense. The opposite vices of irresolution and dogmatism are rooted in the same false opinion that empirical judgments should be indefeasible. Descartes' procedure counts thus as a *rational therapy* of the same sort as that of the Epicureans and Spinoza.

⁶⁴ This "secret joy in (*the*) innermost soul" (Descartes, "Passions," 381) is the result of a diligent pursuit of epistemic virtue, in such a way that "conscience cannot reproach (*us*) for ever failing to do something (*one*) judges to be the best." (*Ibid.*, 382) According to Descartes, this secret joy has the power to make of the subject lord of his passions, and to prevent misfortune for shattering the self into fragments. In a sense, the agent is able to cope with the blows of fortune *insofar as there is nothing of which to reproach himself*. There is an analogue of this view in Spinoza's *acquiescentia in se ipso*, and in Harry Frankfurt's account of the integrated self.

(iii) They also agree on the role played by *responsibilist intellectual virtues* such as humility and openmindedness in our cognitive lives. They are instrumental to put ourselves “*in a position to know*,”⁶⁵ thus being integral “to a *purely epistemic intellectual ethics*.”⁶⁶ However, and contrary to the role played by *cognitive virtues* such as intuitive reason, memory and perception, they are not constitutive of knowledge, to wit, they do not manifest themselves in the *accuracy* of our judgments, helping thus to explain, not how we came to be in a position to rationally believe that p, but how that belief is *true*, and rationally so. In this sense, it is necessary to distinguish between the virtues of the responsible agent that manifest themselves in his will to judge, and those rational operations and capabilities that are exhibited in the judgment’s adroitness, and that, if the judgment is correct, relevantly explain why it is a piece of knowledge. Let us observe that for Descartes, while openmindedness is a requisite for human judgment—it is the virtue of being willingly responsive to the relevant objective evidence—the tasks of collecting and of evaluating the weight of that evidence are proper of perception and rationality, in such a way that the latter virtues explain, not why a judgment is a judgment, but why it is not, given our limitations, a *poor* judgment. A good will coupled to defective rational powers does not make a rational agent. Openmindedness is exhibited in an adroit judgment only in a derivative sense, as a policy of non-interference with the operations of reason. Instead of explaining how the judgment is adroit, it permits us to make adroit judgments.⁶⁷ What makes of a cook an excellent chef is not his will to cook.

(iv) Finally, it is important to note that, although for Descartes it is in a sense true that we always know “by favour of Nature,”⁶⁸ and that empirical knowledge is thus compatible with luck, there is another sense of luck that prevents knowledge. As the example of the traveller who reflectively chose, between two routes, the safer one, but that was robbed by bandits, shows,⁶⁹ Descartes not only thought that responsible agents cannot be blamed for misfortunes, but that, if, given those circumstances, the traveller were fortunate enough to escape

⁶⁵ Sosa, *Judgment and Agency*, 45.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶⁷ For a perfect and detached rational agent the possibility of disintegration (of being false to his rational nature) would not exist. His judgments would be adroit without an effort, however minimal, on his part. This shows that *for certain states* personal intellectual virtues are not required for rationality and knowledge, and so that in limiting cases they are not constitutive (even in a derivative sense) of them.

⁶⁸ Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 505.

⁶⁹ Descartes, “Passions,” 380-381.

undetected, his success would not amount to a complete competence. This means that for Descartes an unfriendly scenario (or a bad situation) prevents adroitness to be manifested, and so that in such conditions the agents' judgment falls short of knowledge. Empirical knowledge is thus compatible with having the good fortune of being situated in such a way that the circumstances are adequate to a proper manifestation of our reflective abilities, but not with a kind of good fortune operative within unfriendly situations. Sosa's analysis of the SSS structure of competences renders analogous results.⁷⁰

In any case, the affinities between the two philosophers can be intuitively apprehended when the following text is compared with the previous remarks on Descartes' conception of the ethical significance of rational agency. Sosa writes:

Fully apt performance goes beyond the merely successful, the competent, and even the reflectively apt. And it is the human, rational animal that can most deeply and extensively guide his performances based on the risk involved, in the light of the competence at his disposal. That is why reason must lord it over the passions, both the appetitive and the emotional.^{71/72}

⁷⁰ See Sosa, *Judgment and Agency*, 95-104.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁷² Thanks to Ernest Sosa for helpful comments on an earlier draft.