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Pyrrhonian scepticism has ever since antiquity been disregarded as a mere, self-proclaimed enemy of human knowledge in the Western history of ideas. After the influential work of René Descartes, who considered himself to be the first conqueror of scepticism, things got even worse than before. Echoing the famous example of his *Meditations*, the nowadays common philosophical practice of using the perceived nihilism of pyrrhonism as a straw-man target for the development of one's own epistemological arguments spread far and wide, all the while actual knowledge of the basic facts declined.

Gradually, things worsened to the point that pyrrhonism in and of itself was – at best – considered a curious, philosophical prank of little or no use neither to philosophy nor society at large, rightfully brushed aside in passing by the great histories of philosophy. Until the mid nineteen fifties, this view was virtually *unopposed* in the history of philosophy as an academic discipline. Sadly, despite many recent studies in the field, this view has, by and large, remained dominant in the public mind as well as within philosophy in general. Yet, if you know where to look, it is quite clear that the *arguments* of pyrrhonism have more or less always been respected for their destructive potential. The best example in this regard is perhaps to be found in Pierre Bayle's *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, the so called “Arsenal of the Enlightenment”, first published in 1696. In this massive work of nine-million words, anyone with a bent for criticism of anything could find ample food for thought. Though swiftly banned by the Catholic Church, the *Dictionnaire* became the best selling philosophical publication of the 18th century. Bayle was, for a period of at least one hundred years, “one of the most widely read philosophers ever”, according to the readily available *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Moreover, Enlightenment hero Voltaire is said to have called Bayle “the greatest master of the art of reasoning that ever wrote”.¹

Isn't it odd, that the French Enlightenment, on the one hand, is well known all across the Western world, and is being taught in all the schools as some kind of triumph of human reason, whereas the *anti-rational* philosophy of pyrrhonism, on the other hand, which to a large extent fuelled the very same Enlightenment project through supplying powerful arguments of criticism, to this day remains hardly more than a philosophical joke? Clearly, the full history of pyrrhonian scepticism is a history of repression. Nonetheless, it is also, as I

¹ URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bayle/#6>> (20080428)

indicate in my paper, a history of more or less covert applications of the pyrrhonist doubt. In this typical ‘perilous utility-view’ of Pyrrhonian scepticism, pyrrhonism is frowned upon as being overly destructive, while its philosophical weaponry of criticism at the same time is marshalled for ulterior motives. Since the sceptic technique of reasoning involves the perpetual establishment of oppositions between propositions of equal strength, the pyrrhonist method is, in effect, all about presenting counter-arguments. Naturally, this is why it all through history has been appreciated mainly among people who wish to present some kind of contrary view. As indicated in my paper, the enemies vary. In the case of bookprinter Henri Estienne, rashly dogmatist philosophers were the enemy. Father Pierre Charron deployed scepticism as a theologian engaged in the struggles of the Counter-Reformation, in order to confound the Calvinist application of human reason to what he considered to be pure matters of faith and revelation. Priest and scientist Pierre Gassendi, for his part, used pyrrhonism to attack Aristotelianism and redirect the seeking of truth to the world of appearances.

For my own part, I have mixed feelings about these practices. On the positive side, these applications of the techniques of pyrrhonian scepticism of course point to the fact that pyrrhonism, contrary to the popular view, is not useless, but in fact played a part in various developments of theology and science during the early days of modernity. In a sense, this is all I hope to show in my paper. On the negative side, however, implicit in the act of application is the perceived need for pyrrhonism to be domesticated, as if it wasn’t a complete philosophy in itself, or rather, as if pyrrhonism itself had no idea of what its own method of radical criticism was good for. This is just plain wrong. In actual fact, pyrrhonism is *very clear* on the point of its own motivations, which are the hope of attaining peace of mind in regard to matters of opinion, and emotional balance in regard to things unavoidable. Regrettably, these indigenous motivations of pyrrhonism itself, and the related question of how on earth any kind of philosophy, let alone scepticism, can possibly be helpful in such matters, are hardly ever discussed in conjunction with the ‘perilous utility’-kind of applications of pyrrhonian scepticism. Just as regrettably, such a discussion also falls far beyond the scope of the present paper.

Very briefly, though, the strategy of the pyrrhonian sceptic is to pit the inherent signifier/signified dualism of language against itself, in order to overcome the dogmatizing and overly metaphysical thought-habits this dualism gives rise to. What makes pyrrhonism unique is certainly not the recognition that this problem stems from language, nor that the

problem is seemingly perpetually reinstated by the dualist mechanics of language, but rather the solution it prescribes. Pyrrhonism builds on the realization that, since the problem is inherent in the dualist mechanics of language, there is no point in simply *declaring* that one's truth-claims aspire to some kind of sensible, merely moderate level of ontological or metaphysical commitment – like, for example, claiming adherence to a monistic model of epistemology as opposed to a dualistic or naively realistic one. You can talk all you want, but the basic problem will remain. Consequently, the pyrrhonist war on metaphysical dualism isn't at all fought by *reasoning* about the problem, but by *manhandling* the actual nuts and bolts of symbolic representation, through deliberately provoking confusion, doubt and rupture of meaning when- and wherever possible. Needless to say, this is what the constant denials and counter-arguments so typical of the sceptic method is all about.

As said by Peter Gärdenfors in his plenary lecture, understanding is seeing a pattern, and once you have seen a certain pattern, it becomes almost impossible to make it go away. The unspoken claim of the sceptic method is that the metaphysical dualism of subject and object is such a pattern, and that to make it go away, as opposed to merely be commented upon, the very understanding of it has to be disrupted. Once it is gone, new patterns may emerge.

Thank you.