

**SPECTERS OF PYRRHO:  
MONTAIGNE'S *ESSAYS* AS PRETEXT**

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**1 Introduction**

Brian C. Ribeiro's attractive book *Sextus, Montaigne, Hume: Pyrrhonizers* stands out among the abundant bibliographical production focused on skepticism. There are many studies devoted to analyze in detail some skeptical argument or counter-argument, to investigate with philological thoroughness certain skeptical or anti-skeptical notions, and to reflexively assess the validity or invalidity of some very concrete aspect of our epistemology in light of a certain trope. In sharp contrast to this perspective, Ribeiro's text poses a general philosophical problem, without giving up intellectual rigor and argumentative precision: why does skepticism matter? This question, which could easily be extended to cover our entire discipline, gives relevance to the volume and makes it a rare exercise of philosophical vindication in an impoverished time of specialization.

Specifically, the author sets out to explore what he calls the Pyrrhonian tradition, that is, a skeptical trend of thought whose arguments were compiled by Sextus Empiricus (in the second or third century of our era) and which goes back to the mythical figure of Pyrrho of Elis (a contemporary of Aristotle). But Ribeiro goes beyond the ancient world in his text since he considers that the type of research promoted by this radical skepticism had a real impact on various modern thinkers, specifically at least in Montaigne and Hume, whom he unhesitatingly describes as Pyrrhonian.

However, his main interest is not historical, for, as I said, what he intends in his book is to vindicate the relevance of Pyrrhonian skepticism in our lives. Thus, there would be two enduring fruits of this radical movement of thinking (supposedly extended in the course of time): on the one hand, to question the doxastic control of human beings, that is, our capacity to respond rationally to skeptical arguments. On the other hand, to argue that Pyrrhonian skepticism provides us with four lasting goods, desirable in their own right: peace of mind, epistemic modesty, a deepening of our identity, and an invincible freedom of thought.

This is as a brief summary of the main theses of the volume, with whose approach I agree. I believe that it is healthy to return to the understanding of philosophy as a "way of life" (to mention Pierre Hadot's well-known expression), both for the legitimization of this activity, and for our lives beyond the Academy. However, the devil (or god) is in the details, and if I leave aside the general approach and stick to the figure of Montaigne and his work, the *Essays*, I must confess that I do not have excessive faith in the personal portrait that Ribeiro sketches of the French thinker, identified in substance and style as a "pure Pyrrhonist". I therefore believe that the text of the *Essays*, undoubtedly largely influenced by the ancient

skeptical trends, cannot be taken simply as a pretext for defending a strong program of Pyrrhonism today.

## 2 Accidental philosopher

In fact, Ribeiro's interpretation of Montaigne's texts as a non-standard version of Pyrrhonism is quite usual (2021, p. 20). By asserting that the *Essays* only distance themselves from the model exemplified by Sextus Empiricus for reasons of historical context, he is joining the chorus of his first attentive readers, such as Montaigne's intellectual disciple, Pierre Charron, or one of his most prominent and early critics, Blaise Pascal.

This interpretation was taken up in the twentieth century by Pierre Villey, a pioneer in coining the expression *crise pyrrhoniennne*, which he used in his monumental study on the sources of The *Essays* to refer to a moment in Montaigne's intellectual biography (Villey, 1908, 1: 390). This researcher argued that the author of the *Essays* had been a Pyrrhonist only during a brief period of crisis in the evolution of his thought, but this punctual and personal situation would be extended in time and space by Richard H. Popkin in his well-known book, *History of Skepticism* (2003, p. 56). Thus, not only Montaigne, as the initiator of the crisis, but several outstanding figures of Modernity, would have turned Pyrrhonism into the persistent specter that haunts Europe, or Western thought, as a whole. Such a reading, which has been very popular, is explicitly shared and sustained by Ribeiro in his book, at least as far as Montaigne is concerned.

It is not the moment to discuss in detail what would be the central, characterizing features of Pyrrhonism as it appears in Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, but it seems clear that at least we have to find *isostheneia*, *epoché* and *ataraxia* to some extent in any non-standard version of such skepticism. That would be the case of Montaigne's *Essays* according to the Villey-Popkin tradition, if we are to speak of any kind of affiliation or resemblance to the classical model.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, as Ribeiro himself acknowledges, even if we strategically stick to one or two essays, especially "An Apology for Raymond Sebond", it is hard to find such characteristics in Montaigne's *Essays*.

Be that as it may, again following Popkin, the author tries to trace, and justify, the Pyrrhonism of the French author by focusing on the essay in which he explicitly quotes *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, without mentioning it. But, even with these restrictions, what we find in "Apology" (not to mention in other essays) is an *asthenia*, or indefinite succession of opinions; instead of a suspension of judgment, a constant exercise of it and, in short, a skepticism without tranquility that hardly fits the supposed Pyrrhonian model.

If the goal of ancient skepticism (which Ribeiro recognizes as one of the enduring goods of Pyrrhonism) was *ataraxia*, it is clear that this goal has been diluted in the *Essays*. Throughout the work, including also the "Apology," references to the inconstancy and mutability of the world follow one after another, beginning with the author's own (most prominently in III, 2, 804-805/907, although the passages are innumerable).<sup>2</sup> The multiplication of examples

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of the various interpretations of skepticism in Montaigne, and of the presence or absence of the features mentioned in the *Essays*, I refer to Raga-Rosaleny, 2020. I take certain elements of what I am now going to expound from that text in a summarized form.

<sup>2</sup> I will cite the *Essays* following the "*Édition municipale*", edited by Villey-Saulnier, with the Roman numeral indicating the volume, followed by the essay and the page in Arabic; I will then point to the equivalent page in the English translation by M. A. Screech. Many examples of the absence of tranquility characteristic of Montaigne's "skepticism" can be found in Larmore, 2004.

contributes to this Heraclitean mobility of the external world, while crumbling any *isostheneia*, but if we add to this the diversity of the French author's positions, the *epoché* also seems to vanish.

Montaigne does not suspend judgment; it would be paradoxical for him to do so if his essays, as he explicitly indicates in those whose theme is education, seek to form his own and that of his reader:

For it seems to me that the first lessons with which we should irrigate his mind should be those [*qui reglent ses meurs et son sens*] which teach him to know himself, and to know how to die... and to live.

Only after showing the boy what will make him a wiser and a better man will you explain to him the elements of Logic, Physics, Geometry and Rhetoric. *Since his judgement has already been formed* he will soon get to the bottom of any science he chooses (I, 26, 159-160/178-179).<sup>3</sup>

Certainly, we can insist on the flexible, unresolved, always open-ended character of it (Ribeiro, 2021, p. 75), but the fallibility of judgments is not equivalent to their suspension, and one would still have to explain Montaigne's resolute rejection of cruelty, or other ethical commitments in which the author manifests himself less tentative or insecure (not to mention the French author's debated ascription to Catholicism, the thorny issue of fideism to which I will return later).

In fact, it is this attachment to Villey-Popkin's interpretation that probably explains Ribeiro's insistence on the supposed Pyrrhonism of the *Essays*. Against such a reading there are several dissenting voices, such as Perler, Defaux or Maia Neto, who advocate a more careful interpretation of Montaigne's texts, attentive to the context of the late Renaissance, where it is academic skepticism that stands out, well known to the scholars of that time thanks to the works of Cicero and Augustine of Hippo (Maia Neto, 2004, p. 18).

Here is where Ribeiro makes one of the most questionable interpretative moves in my opinion. For from a certain difficulty that Sextus himself experienced in distinguishing his position from that of academic skeptics such as Carneades, Ribeiro ends up concluding that Cicero was a radical academic and practically enlists him by force in the thinly populated ranks of Pyrrhonism (without explaining what criteria he uses for this, nor how he distinguishes moderate academic skepticism from radical skepticism, or both from Pyrrhonian skepticism). Moreover, such assimilation serves him to take one of the main features of Ciceronian academic skepticism, *libertas philosophandi*, and turn it into a Pyrrhonian good (Ribeiro, 2021, pp. 63, 136-138).

Indeed, intellectual integrity is one of the keys to academic skepticism, according to Cicero (1990, II, 77), and Montaigne does not hesitate to paraphrase and assume such a conception in the "Apology":

Other people are prejudiced by the customs of their country, by the education given them by their parents or by the chance encounter: normally, before the age of discretion, they are taken by storm and,

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<sup>3</sup> Emphases in the text are mine, as well as the French addition, which Screech did not translate and which can be read as follows: "that regulate his customs and judgement". See also the classic volume of La Charité, 1968 on the notion of judgment in Montaigne, which is mentioned more than two hundred times throughout the *Essays*.

without judgement or choice, accept this or that opinion of the Stoic or Epicurean sects. There they stay, mortgaged, enslaved, caught on a hook which they cannot get off [...]. But why should people like these not also be allowed their freedom, making up their own minds without bonds and slavery? (II, 12, 503-504/561).

In fact, it is easy to see that this is a trait that we constantly find in the work of the French thinker: Montaigne quotes the most diverse opinions received, without committing himself to any of them, or does so only occasionally, in a way that is always revisable (with some exceptions already mentioned). Even Montaigne's intellectual heir, Pierre Charron, will take this freedom as a central criterion of wisdom in the book of the same title where he systematizes the ideas that, without order or concert, emerge from the reading of the *Essays*.

On the other hand, it is true, as Ribeiro rightly points out, that in various passages of the "Apology" Montaigne criticizes the notion of verisimilitude or probability of the academic skeptics, and it seems that his sympathy is, at least in this essay, with the Pyrrhonists. As the author adds, quoting me (2021, p. 72), one might even see the multiple references to Cicero more as material or source in defense of Pyrrhonism than as a representation of the view held by Montaigne. Nevertheless, while at certain moments the French thinker, as I have just noted, rejects verisimilitude in favor of the suspension of judgment (II, 12, 561-562/633), he is not afraid to contradict himself by admitting in other passages that there are opinions that are more probable than others (II, 12, 513/572): "Of all the ancient opinions of men touching religion, it seems to me that the most excusable and verisimilitudinous [...]"; or even maintaining, with a certain irony, that Pyrrhonism seems to him the most probable perspective (II, 12, 561/633): "The Pyrrhonists' idea is bolder, yet, at the same time, more true-seeming".

Such intellectual freedom, or, if you will, such eclecticism and blurring of philosophical boundaries, reaches the extreme when the author of the *Essays* suggests that all philosophers are actually a bit skeptical, even the "Prince of the Dogmatists," Aristotle, who would have exercised a "Pyrrhonism cloaked in affirmation" (II, 12, 507/566). Or, conversely, by pointing out, provocatively, that even skeptics are opinionated, with which they could be affected by the irresolvable dissension in which they usually plunge the supposed dogmatists.<sup>4</sup>

In short, only by forcing the reading of the *Essays*, restricting the examples and ignoring the context of reception of his time, will we find in the work a pure Pyrrhonism. Probably the interpretation of Montaigne as someone strongly influenced by academic skepticism, and mainly by the reading of Cicero, is more plausible. Nevertheless, that same academic integrity allows him to mix all kinds of readings and positions without committing himself completely to any definite school, not even those of Pyrrhonian or academic skepticism. This explains too the variety and incessant mutability of the *Essays* which, like Lichtenberg's mirror-book, reflects what each one is: the stoic finds sparks of the primordial fire lit in its pages, the epicurean, atoms and emptiness in the textual interstices, and the skeptic, for his part, encounters Pyrrho's specters in some chosen paragraphs.

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<sup>4</sup> "[...] I mean the most learned, the best-endowed and the cleverest of men – never agree about anything, not even that the sky is above our heads. Those who doubt everything doubt that too. Those who deny that we can ever know anything say we cannot know whether the sky is above our heads or not. Those two opinions are by far the strongest, numerically" (II, 12, 562-563/634). The emphasis is mine. The "opinions" are, of course, those of academics, who deny that we can know, and that of the Pyrrhonists, who question everything, according to Montaigne.

### 3 A Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man

In the same sense, it is possible to read the other goods that Ribeiro attributes to Pyrrhonian skepticism, and which he supposedly finds in Montaigne's *Essays*. Of course, a very careful exercise of justification has to be carried out in order to integrate into Pyrrhonism the intense attention that Montaigne would have paid to the self in his texts, and which each reader is apparently invited to emulate on his own (Ribeiro, 2021, p. 33). This proto-existentialist interest in the unique and concrete individual, Montaigne's inclination to investigate his consciousness, would have no parallel in antiquity, but Ribeiro proposes it as an element plausibly attributable to Pyrrhonism in the French thinker's version.

Moreover, this auto-biographical examination in which the *Essays* would be summarized (Ribeiro, 2021, p. 77) could be related to the problem of skeptical language, which Sextus had already posed himself without being able to solve it. Thus, although there are no examples of this inordinate interest in the self in Sextus Empiricus, Montaigne would have provided an original solution to the problem of the use of language, and its understanding, for those who live without beliefs, precisely in his auto-biographical writing. If assertive language can lead to the self-refutation of any radical skeptical position, the fact that Montaigne expresses his personal experiences, his impressions and affections, in contrast with whatever happens in the external world, would give rise to a solution that closely links skepticism and the style of the *Essays*, dedicated to interiority, unresolved and always recommenced (Ribeiro, 2021, p. 82).

Undoubtedly, the *Essays* constitute a high point in the art of literary portraiture, even self-portraiture, and one can see in it a reformulation of the old Socratic project, which is interested in the care of oneself and others through knowledge of oneself. The metaphor of painting has foundation, it is found in the warning to the reader, and in various moments in which Montaigne draws a parallel between his writing and painting or portraiture: "Here I want you to be seen in my simple, natural, everyday fashion, without striving or artifice: for it is my own self that I am painting" (To the reader, /lix).<sup>5</sup> But this is not excessively original; already since Quintilian, whom Montaigne had no doubt read, we do find rhetorical resources so that the speaker can present himself to the audience with the vivid colors of the image.

However, a portrait is one thing and the notion of "picture of the self", which is an invention of the critics, is quite another (Balsamo, 2020, p. 70). The well-known story according to which the *Essays* would be devoted to Montaigne's "personality", to his hypertrophied self, is perhaps that of an error, as is much of the autobiographical literary subgenre devoted to paraphrasing decontextualized fragments of his work to justify this proto-existentialist interest of the French author, unexpectedly transfigured into a sort of Narcissus. Curiously, it is again in Villey's work where this reading can be found (Balsamo, 2020, p. 74), which makes Montaigne's "self" the key to the *Essays*. Nor does it seem accidental that once again Popkin allows himself to be caught in Villey's nets, since his psychological conception of Montaigne's supposed "Pyrrhonic crisis" can be seen in no other way. And, finally, it seems that Ribeiro would also have inherited this problematic conception, transferring it to his text.

In contrast to this, as scholars have established, the substantive use of the word "I" in French is a century after the French thinker's work, and arises precisely in a

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<sup>5</sup> There are many passages with pictorial metaphors that allude to the writing of the *Essays*, and also specifically to the portrait of its author, such as famously I, 28, 183/205-206 or II, 17, 653/742.

context of moral criticism, to admonish those who are too much interested in talking about themselves (here would fit Pascal's famous expression, "the self is hateful," which he certainly does not employ in relation to Montaigne, whom he only criticizes for his "foolish project to paint his own portrait"). The *Essays* are thus a portrait "from life" (II, 8, 386/433), but not of an isolated self, of a hypertrophied self-consciousness, but of a model in its moral and intellectual, but also physical and, above all, social plenitude, that of the gentleman of arms and letters, Michel, *Monsieur de Montaigne*.

His is thus a first-person discourse. The *Essays* are an outstanding example of this kind of writing. Their aim though is not so much to trace the limits of subjectivity as to sketch the ethos of a gentleman of the petite nobility. Clearly there is an ethical proposal, as well as political intentions,<sup>6</sup> but at least in book III the latter are mediated by the personal experience of illness and old age, as painted by *Monsieur de Montaigne* in "On experience". In this, as in other essays, the inevitable suffering resulting from his ailments leads him to outline an eclectic and therefore freely elaborated art of living, without adhering to any school.

In this sense too, Montaigne's writing may seem irresolute, open-ended, always revisable, like his own book, but this does not link it to Pyrrhonism (whose style, if we take the example of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines*, bears little resemblance to that of the *Essays*), much less can it be interpreted as a mere expression of affection. On the contrary, Montaigne's digressive, allusion-filled, varied and free style functions perfectly as a rhetorical device, which selects its readers (for it demands attention and engagement, a capable reader or "*suffisant lecteur*") and serves to introduce itself to its audience, inviting them into a metaphorical conversation (Force, 2009, p. 537). The style is the man, but it is not necessary to understand this assertion in a psychological or autobiographical key. Montaigne's model is not Camus or Sartre, but the Latin satirical poets and masters of rhetoric, whose ethos or personal presentation serves to gain the confidence of the audience. Montaigne's is a book "whose faith can be trusted", as he himself warns the reader from the very beginning, and it is this dialogic dimension, this political and social aspect of his work, forgotten in the "picture of the self," that also escapes Ribeiro.

Moreover, as Corti has explained in a magnificent book (2009, p. 115), it may be possible to avoid the dogmatism of the semantic content of our discourse by transforming the way it is presented. By resorting to categories such as Austin's illocutionary act, or to approaches such as the one attributed by Ribeiro to Montaigne, the problem of self-refutation could apparently be circumvented. In that line, the skeptic would only transmit impressions or phenomena related to his interiority, restricted to the magical circle of the subject. But as Corti himself points out, this answer is clearly insufficient, since it seems difficult to reduce a complex language to the pure expression of emotions or intimate impressions; not all the linguistic acts of the skeptic can be the mere confession of an affection. So, if that were Montaigne's central proposition, as far as the language of one who lives without belief is concerned, it would be a scarcely effective one. But I honestly don't think it is, again because it is a matter that Montaigne addresses incidentally in some passages of the "Apology," like any other occurrence or opinion.

And the same impression leaves me the other Pyrrhonian good mentioned by the author, epistemic humility or modesty. Again, my reticence is not directed against the presence of a certain type of humility in the *Essays*. In the work of this

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<sup>6</sup> Desan's biography (2017) is illuminating in this regard. We have abundant bibliography to follow the activity and political interests of the French thinker, before and after his "retirement" from public life, including his two periods as mayor of Bordeaux or his role as mediator in the conflict between Catholics and Huguenots in France.

"old gentleman", body and mind united in indissoluble marriage manifest their limitations, which are common to all and invite us to moderation and temperance, in short, to a certain modesty, in the face of all vanity or arrogance. What seems questionable to me is, again, the linking of this good with the supposed modern Pyrrhonism, as interpreted by Popkin.

Thus, it is undeniable that there are passages in the "Apology", again, in which it is possible to find statements subsumable under the label of "Christian Pyrrhonism" or, more generally, with the terminology popularized by Popkin, of "skeptical fideism" (II, 12, 604/683). And, again, Ribeiro takes advantage of this interpretation, which has elements of clear support in some essays, to bring Montaigne's thought closer to that of Sextus Empiricus, understanding that his declarations of Catholic faith would obey the passive following of traditional forms, in the way that Sextus indicates that the skeptic devoid of beliefs conducts himself. Such a reading has objections, for there are passages in which Montaigne seems much more committed to faith, and not simply a conformist, but Ribeiro leaves them aside, as mere disguises, the necessary deference to an orthodoxy that burned heretics and atheists in the public square (2021, p. 31). This skeptical fideism, which humiliates the powers of reason and the boldness of the reformed innovators of his time, would also be in Montaigne's case behind the aforementioned skeptical good of humility or modesty.

Nevertheless, something must have gone wrong in Montaigne's disguise, perhaps the hieratic mask of Pyrrhonism betrayed him, because as we know, shortly after his death, his literary executor, Marie de Gournay, had to write fiery paratexts defending the orthodoxy of the French thinker. Although these were of no use, because the *Essays* soon entered the *Index librorum prohibitorum* of the Catholic Church, culminating a difficult relationship with the inquisitorial censorship that began with a trip of Montaigne to Rome to defend himself against the objections of the pontifical curia on the occasion of the first edition of his work. In fact, such prohibition prevented the complete translation of the *Essays* into certain languages, such as Spanish, until practically the 20th century (specifically, that of Constantino Román Salamero in 1898) and many were those who questioned its religious stance, starting with the aforementioned Pascal. Even so, the readings of a sincerely Catholic Montaigne are not lacking, since, as was said, there are elements in favor of this not merely conformist interpretation. Be that as it may, the *Essays*, like a satellite, have revolved around the problem of their author's orthodoxy or heterodoxy.

As I see it, the origin of the problem can be traced in the very notion of skeptical fideism, which hides in its bosom an ambiguity. Thus, it was Busson who first used this conceptual centaur (1971, pp. 440-441), tracing its history from its supposed origins in Christian humanism, which would have confronted impiety and dangerous innovations through an alliance between skepticism and faith, to its culmination in authors such as Pascal and Bayle, passing through Montaigne's "Christian Pyrrhonism". The notion enjoyed wide popularity and passed from Busson to Friedrich, from whom it was taken by Popkin, who brought it down to the present day.

In reality, the term fideism was not taken by Busson from the time when this current was supposedly in force, but from the disputes that had been arising in the Catholic Church during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In any case, the conception itself was found by the French scholar in some entries of Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (Raga-Rosaleny, 2020, p. 105), specifically in the articles "Pyrrhon" and "L'eclaircissement sur les pyrrhoniens". What is striking about these texts, however, is the tension they reveal when referring to the

relationship between skepticism and faith. Thus, in certain passages one can find the canonical reading of "skeptical fideism", since the suspension of judgment is seen as the first step towards faith. And yet, the Swiss thinker goes on to argue that the endless skeptical inquiry may be one of the greatest threats to that same faith: "The little boat of Jesus is not made to sail on that stormy sea" (Bayle, 1969, vol. XV, p. 311).

This ambiguity persists within the conception of "skeptical fideism", evidencing the involuntary oxymoron that results from combining the aspiration to a life without beliefs, ideally attainable by argumentative, rational means, with the most fervent and irrational faith. And this conceptual tension was passed on in its entirety to the interpretations of the figure of Montaigne, especially with regard to the reading of Popkin, inherited by Ribeiro. Therefore, although it is undeniable that Montaigne invites to epistemic humility in his texts, it does not seem that the anachronistic and enigmatic label of "skeptical fideism" contributes to clarify his contribution. This good, always desirable in itself, emerges in the *Essays* independently of the philosophical affiliation of its author, and especially without connection to Pyrrhonian orthodoxy.

#### 4 The Phantom of Liberty

Up to this point I have made a brief tour of the four goods that Pyrrhonism would bring us according to Ribeiro, and which he also finds in Montaigne's *Essays*. This work, by other means, would have continued the war of the skeptics against the dogmatists, whose specters have accompanied us almost imperceptibly throughout the history of Western thought. Nevertheless, the balance can be said to be somewhat skeptical, or rather pessimistic: *ataraxia* hardly figures among Montaigne's pages; the intellectual integrity of the French thinker must be attributed to Ciceronian academicism; epistemic humility does not marry well with the enigmatic "skeptical fideism" and the book of good faith that paints its author from life cannot be confused with the various exercises of conscience and self-awareness to which contemporary literature (and philosophical literature perhaps since Rousseau) has accustomed us.

And, what about the skeptical critique of doxastic control, the other enduring contribution of Pyrrhonism to our lives? I am afraid the news doesn't look promising. We can find abundant skeptical arguments if we restrict ourselves to "An Apology for Raymond Sebond", but in any other essay we have to make a fragmentary, selective, and often speculative reading to find such evidence. This is the strategy of Ribeiro who, as I indicated, follows Popkin faithfully, who in turn is inspired by Villey, although he questions the evolutionary, linear reading of Montaigne's thought defended by the French scholar. But if both Popkin and Ribeiro, as well as most current researchers, doubt Villey's last thesis, with that rigid sequence of the thought of the author of the *Essays*: first Stoic, then desperate skeptic, and epicurean *sui generis* at the end of his life, why not also question the notion of crisis? And why present a work fragmentarily, reducing it to one or two essays to support the alleged pure pyrrhonism of Montaigne?

I believe that Villey and Hartle (2005) are very similar in this respect, in spite of their opposing views, and Popkin-Ribeiro too. Indeed, the former seeks to give coherence to the unsystematic thought of the *Essays* by resorting to a linear evolutionary reading, and the latter believes he can account for Montaigne's system of thought by resorting to a dialectical, circular interpretation (Ribeiro, 2021, p. 68). For their part, both Popkin and Ribeiro avoid mobile models and assert Montaigne's philosophical validity and coherence by transforming the mutability



of the *Essays* into the immobility of a Pyrrhonian proposal that would have hardly changed in the course of time (beyond some empirical modifications, in accordance with the different contexts of reception of the skeptical system).

However, as Ribeiro himself points out, Montaigne's thought reacts virulently against any systematic pretension (2021, p. 69). In the "Apology" no less than in many other essays, we can read very harsh criticisms directed at all forms of organized knowledge, in the field of law, medicine, or philosophy, among others. In the same vein, the contrast between life and knowledge, or the role of practice as the touchstone of theory in the *Essays* clashes with the dogmatic adherence to a solution that orders and systematizes a thought as free, varied and diffuse as that of Montaigne.

This is perhaps the main problem of Ribeiro's book, at least in relation to his reading of the French thinker, and it explains some of its inaccuracies. For example, when Montaigne's digressive style is related to Pyrrhonian skepticism, so contrary in its argumentative form to that of the *Essays*. Or also, when Ribeiro tries to justify the relationship between skepticism and subjective interiority, alluding to previous and later models, such as Augustine of Hippo and Descartes (Ribeiro, 2021, p. 141). For if Montaigne's work is not related to the exploration of quasi-contemporary consciousness, it is equally inaccurate to attribute these subjective searches to Augustine of Hippo who, should he confess himself, would always do it in order to let God show himself from deep within, since we are but images of the divinity, according to the Augustinian *nosce te ipsum*.<sup>7</sup> Nor does it seem that the *ego cogito* can be correctly read in a psychological key, despite the semi-biographical fable that introduces the Cartesian conception of the universal structure of reason in the *Discourse on Method*.

Such interpretations are characterized by their imprecision, which can be excused insofar as they are mere sketches, but are more problematic in the central case of Montaigne, because they entail the neglect of important aspects of his work. Specifically, as I have pointed out in connection with the notion of personal discourse in the *Essays*, the supposedly skeptical attention to the self conceals the public and social dimension of the text, the invitation that the author makes to us to enter into conversation with him, in accordance with the criterion of the primacy of practice over theory that Ribeiro himself had pointed out. One of the self-confessed goals of the *Essays* is to address its readers in a time of conflict and violence, to propose a trusting dialogue that allows us to overcome differences or to learn to live with them. Here too there is a therapeutic proposal, a thought understood as a "way of life", but not necessarily under the sign of Pyrrhonism.

That Montaigne read Sextus Empiricus in Estienne's Latin translation is today beyond reasonable doubt. The borrowings in the last third of the "Apology" are practically literal, and it seems obvious that the influence of skepticism was not limited to a moment or to a certain stratum of his work. Now, in Montaigne we find a clear exercise of the *libertas philosophandi* that unties him from any excessive fidelity to one opinion or another, including here skepticism. I believe that Ribeiro's book, excellent as it is, would benefit from applying this freedom to certain interpretative attachments, such as the one he maintains with Popkin when approaching the *Essays*, taken as a pretext to justify a dogmatic thesis. There is no doubt of the importance and seminal character of the work of the American scholar, to whom all of us who are interested in early Modernity owe a great deal. But recognizing his greatness does not bind us to his interpretations and, just as

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<sup>7</sup> "God has made man in his image and likeness, in the mind: there is the image of God. That is why the mind itself cannot be understood, even by itself, insofar as it is an image of God" (*De symbolo*, I, 2). I take the quotation from the magnificent, Gilson, 2021, p. 320.

Baudrillard wanted with Foucault, perhaps it is time to *oublier* Popkin and no longer conjure up the specter of the Pyrrhonian crisis in Modernity.

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