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The Buddhist Pyrrhonism: a comparative approach

El Pirronismo Budista: un enfoque comparativo

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Abstract: This paper aims to make a comparative analysis between some general elements of Pyrrhonian philosophy and Buddhist philosophy, with the purpose of observing similarities in both philosophical approaches. These similarities arise as a legacy of the context of expansion of Alexander's Macedonian Empire, in which Pyrrho of Elis is located. The philosopher came into contact with diverse and rich philosophical positions, for instance that of the mendicant sages (śramaṇas) or, as translated in the West, gymnosophists. And the fruits of this contact were brought back to Greece, leading to the development of a new philosophical position. We will limit ourselves to a specific comparison of the fruits of Pyrrho's contact with Buddhism, analyzing the contributions of some Pyrrhonists such as Sextus Empiricus and some Buddhist philosophers such as Nāgārjuna, understanding skeptical elements in the Buddhist position. Furthermore, the philosophers discussed here also seek to develop and live their philosophies in a pragmatic way, understanding them as ways of living based on a therapeutic aspect, with the aim of alleviating suffering. Consequently, these thinkers adopt an anti-metaphysical stance on reality, understanding that it is indeterminate, thus combating the dogmatic eternalist and/or nihilist stance that permeates both Western and Eastern philosophical traditions.

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Resumen: *El presente artículo tiene como objetivo realizar un análisis comparativo entre algunos elementos generales de la filosofía pirrónica y la filosofía budista, con el fin de observar similitudes en ambos enfoques filosóficos. Estas similitudes surgen como legado del contexto de expansión del Imperio macedonio de Alejandro, en el que se ubica Pirrón de Elis. El filósofo entró en contacto con diversas y ricas posiciones filosóficas, como la de los sabios mendicantes (śramaṇas) o, como se traduce en Occidente, los gimnosofistas. Y los frutos de este contacto fueron llevados de vuelta a Grecia, lo que condujo al desarrollo de una nueva posición filosófica. Nos limitaremos a una comparación específica de los frutos del contacto de Pirrón con el budismo, analizando las contribuciones de algunos pirronistas como Sexto Empírico y algunos filósofos budistas como Nāgārjuna, entendiendo los elementos escépticos de la postura budista. Además, los filósofos aquí discutidos también buscan desarrollar y vivir sus filosofías de manera pragmática, entendiéndolas como formas de vida basadas en un aspecto terapéutico, con el objetivo de aliviar el sufrimiento. En consecuencia, estos pensadores adoptan una postura antimetafísica sobre la realidad, entendiendo que es indeterminada, combatiendo así la postura dogmática eternalista y/o nihilista que impregna tanto la tradición filosófica occidental como la oriental.*

Palabras clave: Pirronismo; Budismo; Escepticismo; Filosofía comparada.

1- Introduction

After a journey to the East that lasted around ten years, Pyrrho of Elis seems to have returned with a behavior atypical for the Greek standards of his time. According to Diogenes Laertius (IX, 61)¹, his interaction with the Gymnosophists in India² seems to have stimulated his thinking and elevated his philosophy to the noblest path. In this way, a new philosophical movement arose which sought the ultimate end in imperturbability based on non-adherence to opinions. Similarly, in the last verse of the Nagarjunian work, *Fundamental Verses of the*

¹ *Lives and Doctrines of Philosophers*. Henceforth D.L..

² The Gymnosophists were a group of mendicant ascetics from different pre-Buddhist and non-Vedic schools with whom Siddhartha Gautama himself had some contact before beginning his doctrine. In the local language they were commonly known as *śramaṇas* (those devoid of self). Among the various schools there was one that stood out for a practice similar to the suspensive attitude of the Pyrrhonist known as *Ajñāna*, about which we will not go into detail here. Furthermore, of these schools, the only one that has survived to the present day is that of the Jainas, one of whose main figures, Mahavira, was said to have been a kind of mentor to the young Siddhartha Gautama. For a better introduction to the subject, see MACIEL, 2022. pp. 8-25. Cf. BRITO, 2011.

*Middle Way (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā)*³ the author pays homage to the Historical Buddha, stating that, moved by piety, he showed the way to the extinction of all theories. The philosophical movement present in both Pyrrho and Nāgārjuna, beyond this apparently distant contact in space and time, created a peculiar philosophical tradition, because they are philosophers who were dissonant with the traditions of the time in which they lived. A certain skepticism, evident in the thought of both Pyrrho and Nāgārjuna, took on a more pragmatic character, becoming a way of life that opposed the worldview of the dogmatists⁴.

The skeptical tradition left by Pyrrho ran its course and developed from the writings of later Pyrrhonists, such as Enesidemus, Agripa and Sextus Empiricus. Nagarjunian philosophy, on the other hand, follows a seemingly new path, but one that is still loaded with a certain orthodoxy. This new movement, namely the *Mahāyāna* trend, involves "giving value to a specific non-canonical literary *corpus* and defending, in contrast to the 'basic' (or *mainstream*) Buddhism of the schools of the Abhidharma tradition, some specific philosophical ideas" (FERRARO, 2016, p. 13).

Nāgārjuna's aim would be a return to Buddhist practices that go directly back to the Historical Buddha

as a powerful attack on the "metaphysical attitude" itself, that is, the tendency - according to the original (hence Aristotelian) meaning of the word "metaphysics" - to identify ultimate causes and principles of reality and to present certain descriptions and definitions of being itself as definitively true (FERRARO, 2016, p. 17).

This "metaphysical attitude", according to the Nagarjunian thesis, would have led Buddhism away from its initial proposal, which was more pragmatic than theoretical. Nāgārjuna's proposal is precisely to return to this original meaning. To this end, the author develops some concepts that have a certain theoretical purpose, but one that is very well delimited. The Nagarjunian understanding of metaphysics, it should be made clear here, is understood from a provisional character, that is, it should not be taken as an ultimate description of reality. In fact, Nāgārjuna understands two instances of thought, or "two

³ Henceforth, MMK. We will use here the translation by FERRARO, 2016.

⁴ See: CASTELLI, 2020.

truths": "The teaching of the *Buddhas* on the *Dharma*⁵ is based on two truths: the ordinary truth of the world and the truth according to the supreme sense" (MMK 24.8). Ordinary truth is equivalent to "the view of reality in substantialist terms" (FERRARO, 2016, p. 20), in other words, it is the understanding that observes the world from separate entities, endowed with an essence, basically following the traditional metaphysical sense, in which it is supposedly possible to make an investigation into the ultimate reality of things, to speak of being as being and to observe the proper nature of entities. Supreme reality, on the other hand, is the overcoming of this condition proposed by ordinary reality, it is pointed out by Nāgārjuna as being "without any predicate or definition" (*idem*), after all, the act of defining something as such is precisely the proposal of ordinary reality, opposed to supreme reality.

Furthermore, supreme reality, it could be said, from the perspective of ordinary reality, is characterized by the idea of emptiness. But this in itself is controversial, since Nāgārjuna understands that theorizing about supreme reality is a means of understanding it, but being clear that this understanding is limited and one must understand this limit, because "The fundamental error, of which Nāgārjuna accuses his opponents, is, finally, that of criticizing emptiness - based on supreme truth - from the 'logic' (substantialist and dichotomous) of ordinary truth" (FERRARO, 2016, p. 545).

Now, since ordinary truth is by definition the common reality to which we are attached as unenlightened beings, any attempt to understand ultimate truth will be based on the logic of this ordinary truth, leading to the problem of understanding emptiness, i.e. ultimate truth, as a theory. Emptiness, therefore, would be a provisional theory that would be discarded at the end of its purpose: "Emptiness has been declared by the victorious *Buddhas* as a means

⁵ *Dharma* in Sanskrit or *Dhamma* in Pali, in Buddhist nomenclature, would be the adept's way of understanding in order to reach the enlightened state. Furthermore, *Dharma* would be understood as a constituent of reality, both from a totalizing perspective and as a unity that connects plurality and even in a more singular way, understood as primary *dharma*s (atomic content) and secondary *dharma*s (phenomenal content). The *Dharma* is described as one of the three jewels of Buddhism, the other two being the Buddhist community (*Sangha*) and the *Buddha* himself. The canonical text that best presents the concept of *Dharma* is the *Dhammapada*, which is credited with being compiled by the historical Buddha himself. There are differences of opinion on this, since Siddhartha left nothing written. Historically, his sermons (*Sutras* in Sanskrit or *Sutta* in Pali) were later compiled in three councils a few centuries after his death, before which the Buddha's discourses were transmitted orally. Cf. *Dhammapada*. Translated by José Carlos Calazans. 2021.

to the extinction of all theories. But those for whom emptiness is a theory define themselves as incorrigible" (MMK 13.8).

Understanding that ultimate reality is the overcoming of the logic that observes entities separately (a logic of being as being), emptiness, on the other hand, understands that entities are interdependent. This is an interesting stance, because if the entity asserts itself from within, it raises the question of how it interacts with the other, and how causal relationships work. If we follow the substantialist logic, cause and effect would originate separately, clearly violating a basic requirement of this relationship, interdependence. To correct this, Nāgārjuna proposes the thesis of dependent co-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), and links it to emptiness. This thesis is one of those present in the realm of ultimate truth, just like that of emptiness; and precisely because of the idea that there is no substantial difference in the realm of ultimate truth, emptiness and dependent coorigination go hand in hand, one completing the other in an interdependent way.⁶

The *pratītyasamutpāda* thesis states that entities arise dependently on their conceptual parts (FERRARO, 2016), for example, the relations of cause and effect follow this model: the cause generates the effect, which in turn generates the cause itself; because the cause only receives this designation of cause once the effect exists, this follows the following logical formula: ($x \leftrightarrow y$), where x = cause and y = effect⁷. A cause without an effect is not the cause of anything, so it is not even a cause; thus, the cause only exists because the effect exists, in other words, the cause conditions the effect and the effect conditions the cause. It is interesting to note that this logic is not just a singular object-to-object relationship, but a plural object-to-object relationship, so that there is no ontological privilege of a single element as "first mover" in relation to the constitution of other objects, thus updating the bi-implicative relationship to a "multi-implicative" relationship, in other words there is a relationship of "ontological horizontality"⁸. In this sense, although we speak in an

⁶ Cf. MMK chapter XXV - *Examination of the nirvāṇa*.

⁷ The *pratītyasamutpāda* thesis, according to Ferraro (2018), has a double interpretative path. The first is both by the Pali canon, starting from the *Digha Nikaya*, and by the tradition of the *Theravāda* and *Sarvastivāda* schools, which refer to a "law of transitive causality, according to which event x produces event y which, in turn, conditions event z " (p. 55). The second way, which we will look at here, is the Nagarjunian way, which would be a "law of reciprocal causality" (*idem*), which will be explained above.

⁸ MACIEL, 2022, p. 19.

epistemological sense, both the concept of *pratītyasamutpāda* and that of *śūnyatā* "describe the ontological status of phenomenal (or Dharmic) entities" (FERRARO, 2016, p. 553). And so, in view of this combination of concepts, understanding that entities arise in reciprocal dependence is equivalent to saying that things do not exist "in themselves", so they are empty.

Now, having established the definition of some Buddhist concepts that will be used below, let's turn our attention to some skeptical definitions, after all, the aim of this paper is to point out intersections between Buddhism and Pyrrhonism, in order to make clear the possibility of dialogue between these philosophical trends.

The skeptic way of acting is characterized, according to Sextus Empiricus, as being the "antithetical ability to oppose apparent things and also thoughts, in every way and whenever possible" (PH 1.8)⁹, so that his goal is the suspension of judgment (*epoché*). In other words, faced with the opposition of arguments and apparent things, the skeptic¹⁰ concludes that there is an equipollent diaphony between arguments (*isostheneia*) and is finally led to the suspension of judgment. Now, what is interesting to note is that the skeptic does not make a substantial separation between the argument and the visible. In fact, there is a relationship of dependence between both dimensions. The skeptic reports what is visible to him, avoiding abstraction beyond that. It is worth defining here what this "visible" would be for the skeptic: in a way, skepticism manifests itself as an epistemology that has phenomena as its basis of operation, in other words, "the skeptic relies on the impression that is forced upon him by affection" (PH 1.13). There is a predilection for the phenomenon over speculation about how things are beyond the phenomenon, because that would be to assume a dogmatic stance, which the skeptic avoids as much as possible.

The visible is the field of action of the skeptic, Nāgārjuna shares and makes more explicit the same position, "The six senses are sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch and mind; their field is the visible etc." (MMK 3.1)¹¹. It's not clear that the Pyrrhonists considered the

⁹ For the quotations from Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, we use Rodrigo Pinto de Brito's translation in: BRITO, 2024. Hereafter, referred to as PH.

¹⁰ Although not all skepticism is Pyrrhonist, this definition of the skeptical mode of action put forward by Sextus Empiricus concerns the Pyrrhonist above all. In fact, "the Pyrrhonist philosopher has been potentially defined by the conceptualization of skeptical conduct, since he is the participant in this ability" (PH 1.11).

¹¹ The six senses mentioned in Nāgārjuna are actually part of the set of 12 āyatanas or sensory spheres, six of which are external and six internal. Cf. MMK chapter III - *Examination of the sensory spheres*.

mind to be a sense, but they did consider that understanding passes through the senses, as a kind of filter during investigation, from an affection (*pathos*). In any case, everything is left to the senses, the sensory spheres become that which connects with everything, similar to the sutra *On the Discourse on Everything*, in which it is stated that Buddha thus answers the question "What is everything?": "Simply the eye and form; ear and sound; nose and aromas; tongue and flavors; body and tactile sensations; intellect and ideas" (FERRARO, 2016, p. 134), forming the 12 *āyatana*s. In other words, everything that can be understood passes through the sensory sphere. This formula follows a path: there is visible reality, this reality is captured by the senses and an understanding or awareness is formed of what the senses capture together with the sieve of affection. Ferraro summarizes this same understanding in Nāgārjuna as follows: "consciousness is indicated as the result of volitions" (FERRARO, 2016, p. 144), these volitions would be the passions and/or desires that hold the entity in the wheel of life (*saṃsāra*).

Having clarified some basic concepts, we will narrow the scope of the analysis by focusing on understanding the two main "goals" in Buddhist and Pyrrhonist thought, namely *nirvāṇa* and *epoché*, respectively, in an intersectional way.

2 - *Nirvāṇa*

Every school of Buddhist doctrine has a final goal that is realized from the cessation of suffering, namely enlightenment (*nirvāṇa*). The idea of *nirvāṇa* is ambiguous due to its application in other contexts outside the Buddhist tradition and also due to the disinclination of the adepts to explain the meaning of the term, after all, they were concerned with achieving *nirvāṇa* rather than defining it, at least that's how Soonil Hwang understood it. Indeed, the author states that,

since Buddhism began to be studied in the Western world, numerous studies of *nirvāṇa* have been undertaken, yet no fully satisfactory clarification of it has been made. This is not surprising if we consider the fact that while for Buddhists it is to reach *nirvāṇa*, it is for scholars to study what *nirvāṇa* may be (HWANG, 2006, p. 9).

In other words, the adherent of the doctrine is more concerned with reaching the final destination than defining what or how that destination would be, which leads one to understand that *nirvāṇa* is only truly understood if it is, in fact, reached. Nāgārjuna

understood this and his way out was to define it apophatically, that is, by denying possible predications. In fact, the author defines *nirvāṇa* as being "without elimination, without attainment, without annihilation, without eternity, without cessation: that is what is called *nirvāṇa*" (MMK 25.3). In this way, it is understood that *nirvāṇa* is a state that is outside the definitions that would be given to objects in the phenomenal field, *nirvāṇa* would be an antipode of *saṃsāra*.

Moreover, the idea of *nirvāṇa* is not exclusive to Buddhism, nor did it originate there; the Vedic literature already brings with it the idea of *nirvāṇa*, as being a liberation from worldly desires, a form of detachment from the forces that govern *saṃsāra*. In verse 26 of chapter 5 of the *Bhagavad-Gita*¹² the word *nirvāṇa* appears in this sense: "Those who are free from all material desires, who are self-realized, self-disciplined, and undertake constant striving for perfection are guaranteed liberation in the Supreme (*Brahman-nirvāṇam*) in the very near future."

Buddhism preserves this meaning, however, without the need to mention the deity Brahma, as usually appears in the Vedic texts, after all, there is no worship of this deity, only the word *nirvāṇa*, and usually translated as enlightenment¹³. Because there is no mention of or appeal to a deity, Buddhist *nirvāṇa* is understood, in many interpretations, to be a wholly individual spiritual/cognitive state. Beyond this meaning, Nāgārjuna will understand *nirvāṇa* in a second way, thus creating two distinct categories. The first type Ferraro translates as "*nirvāṇa* with residue (*sa-uphadi-śeṣa-nirvāṇa*)" (FERRARO, 2016, p. 572), defining it as the type of *nirvāṇa* that results in the cessation of contaminations (*kleśas*)¹⁴. This form of *nirvāṇa* would be one of those achieved while still alive, but this state is not permanent, as

¹² A canonical religious text in Hindu culture, it is part of a larger work called the *Mahabharata*, whose compilation tradition attributes to Veda Vyasa, who also compiled other canonical texts in Indian culture, such as the *Puranas*, for example. We used the translation by PRABHUPĀDA, 2017 (e-book edition).

¹³ This translation is not univocal within Buddhism. Some commentators, such as KALUPAHANA (1986), translate Nāgārjuna's *nirvāṇa* as *Freedom*, which, in free translation, would be something like freedom or liberation.

¹⁴ The contaminations (*kleśas*) concern the cognitive apparatuses that make us attached to the world, which generate ideas, notions, desires, passions. It is the phenomenon itself that makes us attached to objective reality and makes us understand that reality as the only reality.

we would still be bound to the aggregates (*skandhas*)¹⁵, and the one who has become enlightened would still be subject to leaving her enlightened status due to the physiological demands of the body.

In Zen Buddhism, on the other hand, this form of *nirvāṇa* is called *Satori*, being the "acquisition of a new point of view" (SUZUKI, 2017, p. 79), that is, this enlightenment is a new cognitive state of perception. In fact, Suzuki defines *Satori* as "[...] *an intuitive looking into the nature of things in contradistinction to the analytical or logical understanding of it*" (SUZUKI, 1958, p. 230). Leaving aside mystical interpretations, enlightenment, at least in this first sense, is a new way of understanding reality, taking place on an epistemic level, in other words, it is not a form of rapture, the subject is still alive and living life like any human being. For Ferraro *nirvāṇa* in this sense would be a kind of overcoming of ordinary metaphysics, which Nāgārjuna would define as substantialist and/or nihilist metaphysics. Reaching *nirvāṇa* would be the abandonment of the worldview involved in ordinary metaphysics, therefore reality would come to be perceived from the cognitive state that the doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) affirms, as being reality without the ontological differentiation of entities. The enlightened state would be like a new epistemological paradigm.

The second type of *nirvāṇa* is - also translated by Ferraro - "*nirvāṇa* without residue (*nir/an-upadhi-śeṣa-nirvāṇa*)" (FERRARO, 2016, p. 572) and this form refers to enlightenment with the complete cessation of the aggregates (*skandhas*), i.e. it only comes with the physical death of a subject who has attained *nirvāṇa* in life and who at death has become definitively enlightened. This form of *nirvāṇa*, as Hwang quotes, is comparable to the state of a saint,¹⁶ someone who has lived a life of seclusion and detachment and left as an enlightened person. This category is difficult to define without entering into a metaphysical discourse, so in order to distinguish between one type and another, some authors resort to the use of analogies. Indeed, Candrakīrti states that *nirvāṇa* with residue is "comparable to the

¹⁵ In the Buddhist tradition, the five aggregates are the five aspects that make up the sentient being: form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saṃjñā*), mental formation (*saṃskāra*) and consciousness (*vijñāna*). Cf. MMK, chapter 4 - *The examination of the aggregates*.

¹⁶ "[...] the state of a saint can be expressed as *nirvāṇa* without a remainder of clinging, since there is no more attachment left" (Hwang, 2006, pp.14-15).

situation of a village in which the gangs of delinquents have been completely annihilated"¹⁷ whereas *nirvāṇa* without residue "is like the destruction of the same village, whose gangs of delinquents have already been annihilated."¹⁸

After the physical death of the enlightened one, there is a mystery about the fate of the being who has become a buddha. Nāgārjuna gives an answer to those who wonder what happens to one who has attained *nirvāṇa*: "The Venerable One, after extinction, manifests neither as something that exists, nor as something that does not exist, nor both, nor neither" (MMK 25.17). The author again makes an apophatic definition of the fate of the *Tathāgata*¹⁹ using the tetralemma²⁰ which is also used later for the concept of *nirvāṇa* itself. Both the *Tathāgata* and *nirvāṇa* are described as being non-existent, not non-existent; non-existent and non-existent; neither existent nor non-existent.

Then we come to the main opposition, between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*²¹. Although both are opposites, this idea goes back to an ontological definition, which would make no sense due to the fact that *nirvāṇa*, as defined by Nāgārjuna, has neither a "being" nor a "non-being". In this sense, there is no substantial differentiation between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*. Nāgārjuna states this in the following verse: "Between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, there is no difference; between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, there is no difference" (MMK 25.19). The only way to differentiate both dimensions is by the epistemic plane. However, this passage should not be seen as implicative, as Ferraro states, "to say that the two dimensions are not different would not imply that they are therefore identical" (FERRARO, 2016, p. 591). The idea that *nirvāṇa*

¹⁷ PsP 519.12.13 apud FERRARO, 2016, p. 578.

¹⁸ *Idem*. In this analogy, it is understood that the gangs of delinquents are the aggregates, being those elements that inhabit the body and prevent it from realizing its elevation, such as desire, ignorance, etc. Whereas the village is the body itself which, having reached *nirvāṇa* without residue, ceases its activity once the activities of the aggregates have ceased.

¹⁹ One who has attained *nirvāṇa*, but *nirvāṇa* without residue, after the death of the physical body. For more details, see MMK, chapter XXII - *Examination of the Tathāgata*.

²⁰ The tetralemma is an argumentative resource very present in skeptical debates, Nāgārjuna makes use of this tool with some frequency, thus making explicit a skeptical facet in Buddhism. Cf. BECKWITH, 2015.

²¹ The term *saṃsāra* comes from the scriptures of the Pali canon and is used to refer to the flow of changes in a world that follows the laws of causality and conditioning. This world can also be seen from a phenomenological perspective; it would be the world manifested by the principle of the cycle of birth, life and death that is perceived by the senses. Also understood as conventional/ordinary reality in the Nagarjunian vocabulary. On the *nirvāṇa/saṃsāra* relationship, cf. MMK chapter 25 - *Examination of nirvāṇa*.

and *saṃsāra* have no differentiation is only because they both concern the same object in which the dimensions act, that is, objective reality.

In short, *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* are just two ways of seeing the same world, there is no transcendence of reality, because reality is the same and the only one that exists, "*saṃsāra and nirvāṇa* are two ways of apprehending the only reality" (FERRARO, 2016, p. 592). It's as if the veil of Maya²² were removed from the vision of the one who attains enlightenment. Ferraro states that reaching *nirvāṇa* is equivalent to an "epistemic revolution", so *nirvāṇa* has nothing transcendental in the sense that mysticism proposes. While in the Vedas the *Brahman-nirvāṇam* connects to the eternal divine, in Buddhism (mainly Madhyamaka and Zen), where these notions are illusory and fanciful, it is the opposite, in fact the *nirvāṇa* "is the complete destruction of mere fantasies" (FERRARO, 2016, p. 579).

3 - Epoché

Suspension of judgment (*epoché*) is one of the main concepts used by Pyrrhonists, however, Pyrrho is credited with using the notion of indifference (*apatheia*), even so, for the purposes of this research, we will focus on the Sextan argumentative development of the suspensive state to better understand its fields and limits of action, since, despite the chronological distance between Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus, it is the latter who offers us a more finished presentation of Pyrrhonism, since the former wrote nothing. Thus, Sextus clearly postulates some delimitations when he says that the purpose of skepticism is "imperturbability in what concerns opinion, and the balance of affections in what is inevitable" (PH, 1.25). In other words, there are two instances in which skeptical conduct operates: an evaluation in relation to opinions and another evaluation in relation to things that are unavoidable, which Sextus understands as "assent to the impression that is compelled by the affections" (PH, 1.13). It is in these cases of involuntary adherence to appearances that the skeptic establishes his criterion for action; after all, one of the aims of the skeptical life

²² The idea of the Veil of Maya is present in Vedic philosophy, indicating that the world is covered by this veil, which prevents us from accessing the true nature of objects. Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation*, uses the metaphor of the veil of Maya as another way of talking about the phenomenon; the veil covers up the thing-in-itself of the world, making us see only appearance. Cf. SCHOPENHAUER, 2005.

is life "without opinions due to adherence to appearances" (PH, 1.23), since this position, for Sextus, seems to be to some extent in line with ordinary life. Therefore, there is, at least in terms of how one deals with theoretical issues, a separation between ordinary life, which seems less dependent on assertions about metaphysics, and life guided by philosophy and the sciences. The fact is that ordinary life seems to correspond to the reality of phenomena apprehended by the senses in an involuntary way, so there would be no need to create a theoretical set of ideas/opinions in order to live ordinary life, which is a more conscious state and closer to reality.

In relation to opinions, there is no attachment; the skeptic seeks to investigate the arguments put forward by those who claim to investigate the underlying content of what is apparent. Therefore, skeptical investigation seems to have a great concern with the most evident conceptual content of a belief, that is, a concern with language itself. This is clear when Sextus states that "we investigate not what is apparent, but what is said about what is apparent" (PH, 1.19). In this way, there is a strong caution with the use of language, since it is understood to have a crystallizing-dogmatic tendency. The skeptic philosopher, in short, analyzes what is said or presented to her so that, in the end, she doesn't lean dogmatically towards anything, "adhering to the apparent, living without opinions, according to the observance of common life" (PH, 1.23). It's worth noting that from this passage, the skeptic deliberately makes a choice in his adherences, namely the one that goes in line with ordinary life, after all, the aim of Pyrrhonist skepticism is directly linked to life, so the skeptic tends to deal with his opinions in line with ordinary life. Similarly, Zen Buddhist philosophy works on the same principle of moving towards practical life:

The idea of Zen is to grasp life as it flows. There is nothing extraordinary or mysterious about Zen. I raise my hand; I pick up a book from across the table; I hear the boys playing ball outside; I see the clouds passing above the woods: in all this I am practicing Zen, I am living Zen (SUZUKI, 2017, p. 64).

Non-inclination to opinions in a non-dogmatic way is just a way of keeping in constant flux with life, different people have different opinions and life goes on in this way, the skeptic just follows this fluidity, of course in constant observation of his inclinations. On the other hand, in relation to the balance of affections, the skeptic seems to deal with this more easily

than convincing his accusers of his supposed dogmatism. Now, in general, opinions are uttered with some effect in mind - even if it is the paradoxical and problematic effect of producing a discourse that defends non-adherence to opinions - because, in the case of the skeptic, she depends on others understanding her point of view²³; now, with regard to the moderation of affections, it manifests itself much more as an internal, individual matter, respecting the subjective autonomy of the skeptic, thus leading to her characteristic indifference. In this way, the skeptic reaches a state of tranquility in relation to opinions, because she starts to treat theories (*pragmata*) calmly, without exaltation, due to the equipollence between them, from which follows a state of imperturbability.

However, this state of imperturbability seems to be put to the test in more direct questions than opinionated ones. In fact, it is said about Pyrrho, who was known for his indifference, that he was often disturbed on specific occasions, such as "when he was frightened, having been attacked by dogs, he replied to the one who accused him that it is difficult to completely strip oneself of the human" (DL IX, 66) or when demonstrating his hostility towards the sophists (DL IX, 69).

This conduct finds a parallel in Nāgārjuna, when he elaborates the concept of "*nirvāṇa* with residue (*sa-uphadi-śeṣa-nirvāṇa*)" (FERRARO, 2016, p. 572), in which even having reached a state of imperturbability, this state would not be permanent. In fact, even with such a supposedly elevated conduct, almost like that of a human above the human, there will be situations in which maintaining this posture will become harmful: "we do not consider that the skeptic is totally tranquil, but we say that he is bothered by what is coerced upon him; for we agree that sometimes they shudder and feel thirsty and have other similar affections" (PH, 1.29). One of Pyrrho's disciples, Timon of Fliunte, quoted by Diogenes Laertius, exalted him by asking "how, being mortal, do you easily lead a peaceful life, only guiding mortals in the manner of a god?" (D.L. IX, 65). From a Buddhist perspective, this image that Timon projects

²³ In order not to be accused of dogmatism, however, this position is debatable. On the one hand, we have Pyrrhus who, with his indifference, hardly cared what anyone said about his conduct and lived his life indifferently. We see this indifference recorded in the passage in which, when in the middle of a speech, even if ignored, he continued to speak (D.L. IX, 63). On the other hand, we have Sextus Empiricus who saw the need to create a whole section in one of his main works to justify the skeptic's non-dogmatic position.

onto Pyrrho is similar to that of a *Bodhisattva*²⁴, who has an almost divine aspect, with the aim of teaching the way to a peaceful and moderate life. Even though Pyrrho had no intention of becoming a guide, his conduct was so notorious that disciples arose out of the simple need to follow in the footsteps of their master, who was also indifferent to this.

Indifferentism does not arise out of mere belief or without a logical basis; in fact, there is a motive that determines the need for indifferent conduct. We can trace this motivation by looking at an issue that recurs in both Pyrrhonism and Buddhism, namely the problem of the criterion. This problem is developed because of a central question, present in late Sextan Pyrrhonism, but whose first proposal is already attributed to Pyrrho:

Nothing is honorable or shameful, nothing is just or unjust, and he applied equally to all things the principle that nothing really exists, maintaining that all human acts are determined by habits and conventions, since each thing is no more this than that (DL IX, 61).

From this passage, it can be seen that Pyrrho denied an inherent nature to things, that is, opinions about objects arise by deliberate convention and do not emanate from the objects themselves, dealing only with how objects appear. The problem with the criterion lies in defining a universal criterion, due to the fact that we are investigating how appearance is presented to us, it is enough to observe how Sextus defines what skepticism is, the "antithetical ability to oppose apparent things and also thoughts, in every way and whenever possible" (PH, 1.8). In this way it can be understood that, in addition to the investigation of the apparent (through the senses), thought also enters into the formula, so that it also deals with the apparent. On the other hand, in the case of Buddhism and in relation to the opposition arising from this antithetical ability, it can be thought of as a non-dogmatic way of categorizing things, in which, respecting the principle that objects do not have a nature of

²⁴ The *Bodhisattva*, in *Māhāyāna* culture, manifests as a guide to enlightenment. In Sanskrit, *Bodhi* means enlightenment itself and *Sattva* means something like janitor or one who looks after, who guides, a figure who has an aspect of wisdom and leadership. The *Bodhisattva* would be the one who has reached a state of enlightenment and has the duty to help others to follow the same path. Of course, there is a whole doctrine behind the *Bodhisattva* culture, in which a release from ordinary life is necessary for those who wish to follow the *Bodhisattva* path, which is not the case with Pyrrho. However, Timon's description is something similar, someone of such high conduct that he resembles a deity and guides the common people towards a kind of mental liberation. To learn more about the development of the *Bodhisattva* culture, see: DAYAL, 1970.

their own, we perceive how objects are by opposing them to other objects. Thus, using the logic of the principle of dependent co-origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), one realizes that through the lack of a substantial nature, objects affirm themselves through opposition to the other. The formulation of a criterion seems to follow this same logic, consequently leading to a circularity. In an attempt to define any question, a criterion is stipulated, but again, due to the lack of its own nature, the criterion cannot be affirmed by itself, so a new criterion must be stipulated to confirm the original criterion, and so it goes on *ad infinitum*, which ultimately leads to the need to suspend judgment, due to the impossibility of preserving a self-sufficient criterion.²⁵

Finally, Sextus understands that the purpose of skepticism is imperturbability (PH, 1.12), so that this imperturbability comes concomitantly with suspensive activity. In turn, suspension is a result of the perception of equipollence between entities (apparent things and thoughts) (PH, 1.8), in which equipollence is manifested by the lack of possibility of deciding on a criterion of adherence between one thing and another. Through this suspensive process, the impossibility of establishing a criterion of adherence becomes clear, since it is understood that we deal with objects in their appearance, even in the cognitive sphere and, because of language, the way it carries out its activity - in a way that seems to corrode dogmatism - thought itself deals with the result of what is captured by sensory activity.

The whole problem for the skeptic, which also extends to the Buddhist *madhyamika*, seems to be that we live in a substantialist illusion in which we equate epistemological reality with ontological reality, which creates the illusion and anguish that what is fleeting is ultimately fixed.

This reasoning is a problem for Nāgārjuna, after all, "if you conceive of the real existence of beings in terms of their own nature, then you necessarily see them as devoid of

²⁵ It's interesting to note that the suspension of judgment (*epochê*) is similar to the logic of emptiness (*śūnyatā*). Now, the suspensive skeptic is only such because of the problem of the criterion, because of the substantial non-existence of objects, but preserving a degree of realism by dealing with the apparent existence of the object. Understanding that the ontological status seems to be empty, what remains is to deal with the epistemological status, which is, in the end, what affirms that the object exists. If there is no substance, at the very least there is an appearance that is mistakenly seen as substance: "the emptiness of an object means its substantial non-existence, but not its absolute non-existence" (FERRARO, 2016, p. 556). Furthermore, the problem of the criterion is present in Agrippa's tropes following a similar logical chain (cf. PH, 1.164-177).

causes and conditions" (MMK 24.17). In other words, causal relations are directly linked to the becoming of objects; in the ontological sphere, it makes no sense for a substance, which by definition is self-existent, to have an external cause; every object would be endowed with a substance that would be a kind of prime mover of itself, in short, all objects would not need to relate to other objects in order to affirm their existence in space and time.

From this reasoning, anguish or any other existential disturbance is created, after all, if this were the case, there would be no way of tracing any origin of anything, a pathology, for example, would begin in itself, making any attempt at diagnosis or any possibility of cessation impossible. Both enlightenment (*nirvāṇa*) and indifferentism (*adiaphoria*), imperturbability (*ataraxía*) and stillness (*hesuxia*) should result from a constant exercise of understanding reality as devoid of substance. Without the internalization of this understanding, the act of suspension and, ultimately, imperturbability become a theoretical utopia, which is why skepticism, as defined by Sextus, is a skill and, in the same way as Buddhism, especially Zen, it manifests itself as a direct appeal to life, requiring a practice and a change of spistemological paradigm for its realization. Nāgārjuna makes the requirement for this paradigm shift very clear when he separates ordinary reality from supreme reality, the former as a pedagogical-soteriological reality, permeated by theorizing and conceptualization, and the latter as a reality purely of practical activity, in which the need to theorize about practice has already been abandoned (FERRARO, 2016, pp. 546-547). The Pyrrhonist way seems to follow the same logic, in which the first realm is that of the opposition of appearances and thoughts, a reality characterized by plurality with regard to what is under investigation, to ultimately reach the state of *aphasia and ataraxia*, in which there is no need for further investigation.

4- Final considerations

In addition to comparing and taking up the genealogy between Buddhism and Pyrrhonism, the aim of this text was to provide support for thinking about both of them in a more comprehensive way. Some of the problems that permeate Pyrrhonism from its very beginnings to contemporary studies, such as the problem of *apraxia* or accusations of

dogmatism, seem to find ways of being circumvented in Buddhism, and especially in Nagarjuna's philosophy, while respecting the limits of the scope of comparison, since, in general, Nagarjuna, in the eyes of a Pyrrhonist, may seem to fit sufficient criteria to be considered a dogmatist, since he considers himself a "theorist of emptiness"²⁶. However, as has been argued throughout this paper, some issues seem to arise thanks to interpretative problems advanced by detractors (of both Buddhism and Pyrrhonism), this becomes evident when we analyze the accusations and how they manifest themselves, as Kuzminski (2008) states, "Pyrrhonic skepticism seems to make little or no sense to dogmatists" (p. 39). This "making sense" seems to be an obstinacy on the part of dogmatists that any philosophy must be dogmatically attached to a logic of thought that does not apply to skepticism. Furthermore, Sextus clearly affirms the pragmatic character of skepticism by stating that it would be a conduct (PH, 1.4). Therefore, it does not seem to be enough to understand skepticism from a purely theoretical point of view; there seems to be a demand for a certain stance beyond theorizing, a need for action in all spheres of life as much as possible.

Furthermore, it's interesting how a certain skepticism, originating in Buddhism, is a gateway to thinking about a skeptical lifestyle, whether in the moral, behavioral or any other sphere. After all, the idea is that Pyrrhonism, according to Beckwith (2015), would have a purpose similar to that of the Historical Buddha, thus, "The narratives present Pyrrho as an ordinary man, somewhat ascetic and hermetic, who understood much about the human condition and what one needed to do to overcome it" (p. 54). Now, this human condition that needs to be overcome seems to be precisely the condition of suffering or disturbance - due to disagreements and impasses between opinions and actions - and so Pyrrhonism differs from the instrumental or mitigated skeptical investigation that is usually carried out by dogmatists. Hence, the problem of suffering will only be solved if skepticism is adopted as a way of life.

This interpretation is in line with Nāgārjuna's assertion that living an undisturbed life would require an "epistemic revolution", that is, a radical change in a paradigmatically situated epistemological habit: it is necessary to relax the habit of clinging to dogmas and

²⁶ In verse 69 of the "*Dissolutions of Controversies*" (*Vigrahavyāvartanī*) Nāgārjuna does not explicitly make it clear that he considers himself a "theoretician of emptiness". However, he does not seem to diverge from the ideas defended by those who consider themselves to be such. Nevertheless, Ferraro (2023) understands that Nāgārjuna defines himself as a "theorist of emptiness", or a supporter of the notion of emptiness (*śūnyatāvādin*).

live a life, at the very least, with more malleable opinions, understanding its limits. In this way, we would be close to understanding the ultimate truth, as the perception of objects as not having substance (as well as the perception of oneself as something without substance), and this would manifest itself in ordinary life as a detachment, when necessary, from ideas or everyday habits that cause some kind of discomfort, while also avoiding a radicalization of detachment that would lead to a potentially dangerous relativism, becoming an attachment to detachment. This kind of middle way, in this sense, would be similar to the "balance of affections" (PH, 1.25).

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