
ENUNCIÇÃO

Revista do Programa de Pós-graduação em Filosofia da UFRRJ

Language And Crafts: The Practicability Of Ancient Skepticism As Philosophy
(review of: BRITO, R. P. *The Skeptical Dynamis and Its Pragmatic Possibilities*. New
York, 2022, Springer, Synthese Library 455)

Linguagem e ofícios: a viabilidade do ceticismo antigo como filosofia (resenha de:
BRITO, R. P. The Skeptical Dynamis and Its Pragmatic Possibilities. New York, 2022,
Springer, Synthese Library 455)

Guadalupe Reinoso*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0003-5732>

Maximo Castelli⁺

<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-0222-6432>

the apraxia argument followed the progress of Skepticism as a shadow
(Brito, *The Skeptical*, p. viii)

Skepticism, particularly in the modern philosophical context, has often been regarded as a futile and impracticable philosophical enterprise, an incurable disease of reason, and an impossible way of life. Given this destructive power, the corrosive effects of skepticism should be contained. It can keep its critical utility as long as it serves to evaluate the strength of our arguments and to eliminate prejudices. The purpose of Brito's book is to provide a

* CONICET, SeCyT, UNC. E-mail: guadalupe.reinoso@unc.edu.ar.

⁺ SeCyT, UNC. E-mail: maximocastelli315@hotmail.com.

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more comprehensive perspective on the origins of skepticism and the challenges it has confronted, which extend beyond the modern charge of impracticability and the impossibility of a way of life. This strategy demonstrates that ancient skepticism, especially Pyrrhonism, is a viable philosophical project and that it is a philosophy that conceived itself in light of other challenges that sought to question it. One of the most novel aspects of the book is its presentation of the challenges of ancient skepticism as a philosophical project in critical dialogue with Aristotle's philosophy. Even though skepticism as we know it - as a philosophical orientation -, and in particular Sextus's Pyrrhonism, emerged only later, Aristotle was already arguing against positions that contained the seeds of skepticism. Thus, Aristotle's philosophy—and, specifically, his criticism of the 'proto-skeptics'—functions as one of the guiding threads of this book.

The Skeptical Dynamis and Its Pragmatic Possibilities is the result of discussions with different researchers in the field and of exchanges with undergraduate and postgraduate students. Each part and chapter is thoughtfully introduced, summarized, and concluded. The transitions between chapters are handled with clarity, offering refreshing conclusions while laying the groundwork for the next section, all within a well-crafted academic framework. The book remains accessible to readers who are not specialists in the subject, thanks to its propaedeutic tone. Rather than assuming extensive prior knowledge, it offers a solid reconstruction of relevant debates and topics, enabling non-experts to engage in discussions on Greek skepticism. On the other hand, it provides significant tools to scholars. The book is divided into two main parts, which in turn are subdivided into chapters, and a series of appendices. Each chapter opens with a brief summary that helps introduce readers to the discussions and clearly articulates the book's divisions. These appendices offer supplementary but crucial conceptual and historical data concerning the schools that primarily engaged in contention with Pyrrhonism. It also includes: a general introduction to Stoic philosophy, followed by conceptual tables of Stoicism, skepticism before Sextus Empiricus, as well as chronological tables of the main thinkers and philosophical schools, and of the medical schools. Meticulous bibliographical references throughout further

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enhance the book's scholarly value. For all these reasons, we recommend this book as a valuable pedagogical resource for those teaching on the subject.

Considering Aristotle's philosophy, the first part of the book focuses on the accusation of *apraxia* already outlined in his *Metaphysics* IV against the figure of proto-skeptics (that included dogmatic philosophers such as Homer, Heraclitus, and Democritus¹). The second part focuses on the notion of elements (*stoicheia*) to establish the status of the crafts (*technai*). Both the notion of elements and the notion of crafts, and their entailment, were postulated and discussed by Aristotle. Furthermore, it is essential to highlight another richness of the book: the balance between the discussions of the conceptual problems entailed by these challenges and the reconstruction of a brief but very precise history of the sources of Greek ancient skepticism. Regarding the conceptual discussions that the challenges of *apraxia* and the notion of elements present, we consider that Brito highlights the Pyrrhonian reflections on language and the possibilities of crafts or arts (for instance grammar and rhetoric) as a response to such challenges, and defends the skeptical philosophy as practicable.

Bruto opens the first part by addressing the nihilistic consequences of modern views on skepticism, arguing that "the present charge that Skepticism leads to a kind of way of life that cannot be fully lived in practice is born in Modern Philosophy"². Hume is posited as a paradigm of the conflict between philosophy and life. Brito emphasizes that, even though "we know that Sextan Pyrrhonism starts to impact in Europe after the fifteenth century, culminating in the Latin version of Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, published in 1562"³, Hume does not show deep knowledge of Pyrrhonian skepticism. It should be noted that Brito, more focused on Greek Pyrrhonian skepticism as an influence on Hume, does not emphasize the importance of Cicero's Roman academic skepticism for Humean thought⁴. However, as

¹ See the chronological table in BRITO, *The Skeptical Dynamis*, p. 127

² *Ibidem*, p. vii.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁴ The mentions of Cicero are linked to the reconstruction of the debate between Stoics and scholars, and not to give an account of his philosophy or his later influence. Although the first part of Brito's book gives historical

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he shows, different skepticisms have faced significant challenges throughout history, and the modern nihilistic charge is just the tip of the *iceberg*⁵.

Brito deepens into the history of the challenges, showing that the root of these can be traced to Aristotle's critique against those who reject the principle of non-contradiction—which he regards as the most certain of all principles. Aristotle's perspective, particularly in *Metaphysics* IV, targets the proto-skeptics—a term that may extend beyond Pyrrho and his contemporaries to include any negative-dogmatic stance. According to Aristotle, denying the principle of non-contradiction undermines the very possibility of discourse, as discourse is intelligible only because this principle holds. Moreover, his critique extends beyond the logical domain to suggest that those who reject the principle ultimately fall into a paradoxical and inconsistent way of life. Failing to abide by it leads to *adynamia* (some sort of “inability”⁶) and, ultimately, to self-refutation, since one must employ rational discourse to argue against the principle—yet such discourse presupposes the very thing being denied. Later critics of skepticism inherited Aristotle's objections, particularly the charge of *apraxia* in terms of *adynamia*. These critiques address not only the coherence and viability of skepticism as a position capable of participating in discourse but also the practicability of a skeptical life. Thus, the seed of the argument of *apraxia* and self-refutability can be traced to Aristotle, and its legacy followed skepticism as a shadow.

Another aspect to highlight about the book is that we believe it can enrich the ongoing dialogue on the possibility of exchange between Eastern and Western philosophical ideas. The historical component that we are interested in underlining of the period to which Pyrrho belongs is that, also in India, other figures adopted negative dogmatic stances regarding substantial existence and ultimate nonexistence. In particular, the teachings of the Buddha proposed a Middle Way—a path of life that neither affirmed the substantial existence of

indications of the development of the different ancient skeptical orientations, the focus is on the history of Pyrrhonism, Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 37-40, 49.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

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things nor denied them as ultimately nonexistent⁷. In this regard, Brito's meticulous analysis of Pyrrho's legacy offers—not only in this respect—a valuable historical and conceptual tool for scholarly debate and instruction on the history of Greek skepticism, but also allows for dialogue with the traditions of the East. Accordingly, Brito examines the available testimonies—particularly that of Diogenes Laertius—and considers the possibility of anachronisms or the misapplication of concepts such as *akatalepsia* (inapprehensibility), *ataraxia* (imperturbability), and *epoche* (suspension of judgment) when referring to Pyrrho. He concludes that Diogenes' account is a mishmash of sources, that Pyrrho shared with other Atomists a form of negative dogmatism, and that he further intensified the ethical implications drawn from Atomistic physics and epistemology—especially following his journey to India with Anaxarchus, where he encountered the Naked Sages and the Magi, figures often associated with Indian philosophical traditions.

Some studies⁸ have explored the similarities between the skeptical orientation of Pyrrho and the teachings of the Buddha, particularly through interpretations of Nāgārjuna—a central figure in Indian philosophy, often considered a skeptic, and a figure that proves hard to define historically. Scholars frequently emphasize his use of dogmatic logical structures to dismantle metaphysical assertions, his rejection of *svabhāva* (inherent existence), and his vision of *nirvāṇa* (liberation) based on the emptiness of all things—including the concept of emptiness itself—as key points of comparison between both traditions. However, such analyses are often rooted in the testimony of Diogenes, with special attention to terms used by Sextus Empiricus. Brito's precision in tracing the historical use of certain concepts throughout the history of Pyrrhonism has the potential to reshape the ongoing debate on East-West philosophical connections. A question arises as to whether the forms of indifference

⁷ Cf. CASTELLI, M. *El Escepticismo como Orientación Filosófica: Escepticismo Pirrónico y el Escepticismo de Nāgārjuna*. Trabajo Final de Máster. 2020. Madrid: Uned, pp. 31-37

⁸ See: CASTELLI, M. *El Escepticismo como Orientación Filosófica*, 2020. Madrid: Uned. DREYFUS, G., and Garfield, J. L. *Madhyamaka and Classical Greek Skepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. GARFIELD, J. L. "Epoché and Śūnyatā: Skepticism East and West". *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 40, no. 3, 1990, 285-307. KUZMINSKI, A. "Pyrrhonism and the Madhyamaka". *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2007, 482-511.

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(*adiaphoria*) and impassibility (*astorgia*) attributed by Brito to Pyrrho have their origins in his journey to India—or whether Pyrrho may have influenced certain Indian sages with his own ideas. In this sense, the book invites further comparative studies aimed at clarifying whether there was an exchange or mutual influence between East and West. Furthermore, an analysis of the challenges faced by this “Eastern Skepticism” could shed light on the argument of practicability.

Another major contribution of the first part of the book is its impact on the contemporary debate between *rustic* and *urban* interpretations of Pyrrhonism. The debate centered on the scope of the suspension of judgment, based on the examination of the beliefs to which the Pyrrhonian skeptic may subscribe or assent. Thus, and following the terminology suggested by Barnes⁹, the two positions are briefly defined as follows: in the *rustic* interpretation the suspension is global or radical over all kinds of beliefs; in the *urban* one, the suspension is limited only to philosophical dogmata¹⁰. This debate has implications for the broader debate about the viability of skeptical philosophy and most especially for the possibility of a way of life. The *rustics* conclude that if one accepts the global scope of suspension of judgment, life is cancelled. The *urbans*, by narrowing the scope of suspension of judgment, do not face the charge of *apraxia*.

Bruto's position starts from a diagnosis: the debate between *rustics* and *urbans* interpretations reaches an *aporia*. His proposal is to overcome this diagnosis by postulating a “middle way”¹¹. The *aporia* is established because the *rustics*: (a) interpret in a chronologically impeccable manner; (b) correctly expand the reach of suspension of judgment (and of the dogmata); (c) do not preserve ordinary life; (d) do not free skepticism of the *apraxia*. While the *urbans*: (a) have the anachronistic device of insulation; (b) reduce

⁹ BRITO, *The Skeptical Dynamis*, p. 54.

¹⁰ Cf. *Ibidem*, pp. 54-56.

¹¹ For a study of the reflections on language made by Sextus in the first book of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* beyond the rustic-urban debate see BRITO, R. P. de. *Sobre a noção de linguagem subjacente ao ceticismo pirrônico sextiano: um estudo do livro I de Esboços Pirrônicos, de Sexto Empírico, acompanhado de tradução e de uma investigação teórico-metodológica*. UF de Juiz de Fora, Faculdade de Letras. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Linguística, 2024.

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the range of the suspension of judgment (and of the dogmata); (c) they immunize ordinary life; (d) protect skepticism from *apraxia*¹². Brito's *sub-urban*¹³ proposal takes aspects from both positions in defense of the practicability of Pyrrhonism through a linguistic strategy that also advances his conception of the crafts, which he develops in the second part of the book.

The key will be to focus not on the scope of suspension of judgment, but on the notion of *dogmata*. To this end, he evaluates in what linguistic sense the Pyrrhonian makes assertions. The skeptic does not assert, does not adhere to the operator "it is true that...", in face of an assertion he does not refute with another assertion. Brito proposes to interpret skeptical expressions as speech acts from the linguistic-pragmatist approach of J. L. Austin¹⁴. At first he explores the distinction between *constative* and *performative*, understanding that Pyrrhonian speech acts fit the description of the latter. However, Austin himself showed the limits of this distinction and proposed three different explanatory levels in the speech acts: 1. the *locutionary*, the intonation and the syntactic structure of utterances, having meaning and reference; 2. the *illocutionary*, which is the very act of uttering and can be expressed either by a *performative* verb or by a *constative* verb; 3. the *perlocutionary*, which corresponds to an effect caused on the listener when performing a locutionary and an illocutionary act simultaneously¹⁵.

Brito's proposal consists in postulating the illocutionary act of skeptical expressions as different from dogmatic assertions, and the way of evaluating them, without the categories such as "truth/falsity"¹⁶. Thus he succeeds in accepting with the *rustics* the radicality of the suspension of judgment without denying, with the *urban*, everyday life. In other words, his sub-urban proposal avoids the problem of anachronism and insulation (the separation between philosophy and everyday life) as well as the accusation of *apraxia* in all its

¹² Cf. BRITO, *The Skeptical Dynamis*, pp. 57-58.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 59. To interpret skeptical expressions as non-destructive from an approach that focuses on methodological aspects see REINOSO, G. "Linguistic Pyrrhonism: Self-Destruction, Dogmatic Assertions, and Skeptical Expressions". In this Dossiê "Ceticismos", *Revista Enunciação*, 2025, [forthcoming].

¹⁵ BRITO, *The Skeptical Dynamis*, p. 64.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 58. For a different but complementary exploration of this topic see REINOSO, *Linguistic Pyrrhonism*, [forthcoming].

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complexity. This rescue of skeptical expressions through the illocutionary dimension of speech acts involves recovering everyday linguistic uses. These lead us to the second part of the book in which he combines the topics of language and the crafts. In this section Brito will concentrate on Sextus Empiricus' discussion of the crafts starting from the notion of elements but only focusing on the books on the language arts: grammar and rhetoric.

As previously mentioned, for Brito, it is Aristotelian philosophy that serves as the underlying framework for the discussion of skepticism, particularly the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus, over which the dense shadow of *apraxia* is projected. In order to dissipate this density, Sextus will no longer deal with dogmatic philosophy, but with the arts of the professors. The choice of Aristotle is relevant since he "is the first to develop a philosophical conception of *techne* as a kind of craft in which the quality of the performance is related to the handling of certain constitutive elements (*stoicheia*)"¹⁷.

According to the most recent cataloguing, there are three books by Sextus. *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (PH), subdivided into three books; the second is composed by six works organized and named as *Against the Professors* (or *Mathematicians*), usually referred to as M I to M VI (*Against the Grammarians*; *Against the Rhetoricians*; *Against the Geometers*; *Against the Arithmeticians*; *Against the Astrologers*; *Against the Musicians*); and the third is called *Against the Dogmatists*, usually referred to as M VII to M XI, and composed by three works (*Against the Logicians*, in two books; *Against the Physicists*, in two books; and *Against the Ethicists*)¹⁸. Brito's objective is articulated in two respects: firstly, to underscore the corrosive nature of the pyrrhonian critique of the Aristotelian notion of elements; and secondly, to demonstrate that this critique enables a novel interpretation of the crafts, thus providing a defense of the practicability of skeptical philosophy.

Bruto's proposal begins by describing how the skeptic attacks the elements in general, and then the craft of grammar (*techne grammatike*) in particular. The general criticism is based on showing the *aporia* that theorists reach when they propose different conflicting

¹⁷ BRITO, *The Skeptical Dynamis*, p. 69.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 72-73.

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theories about what is the basic and founding element -the letters- of language. With regard to the crafts of grammar and rhetoric, and in line with the strategy of placing the skeptical reflections on language as the articulating framework of the book, the stress will be placed on the pragmatic dimension already exhibited in the *sub-urban* interpretation of pyrrhonism. As opposed to the discussion of the rules of precision for the correct use of Greek, the recovery and defense of ordinary uses is shown as a pragmatic criterion for the aesthetic evaluation (the beauty of the language) as well as for the correction of unfortunate or deviant uses¹⁹.

This strategy rehearsed in the second part of the book goes beyond the purpose of reconstructing Sextus Empiricus' strategy and articulating it with that already exhibited in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. It contributes to three innovative topics:

1. The pragmatic criteria adopted by Sextus do not only apply to the uses of words but also to other public activities: "actions according to one's own experiences in the arena of the communal life, the arena of the habit (*ethos*), and of the convention or law (*nomos*), and also the arena of the communal (*koinos*), all of which the skeptic participates in (PH I 237.7)"²⁰. Although it is not the aim of the book, a non-conservative interpretation of Pyrrhonism in the political dimension is suggested. Thus skepticism is not a destruction of community life but rather a defense of it.

2. For Brito, the discussion contained in the six books of *Against Professors* contains an alternative model of knowledge, not a negation of it: "a conception of knowledge which we can call empiricist and pragmatic, since it seeks the truth only by approximation and adequacy"²¹.

3. The discussion of these crafts also implies a way of reformulating the development of science. It implies a new model for both philosophy and medicine²².

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 75-76.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

²² See the discussion with the philosopher/physician Galen (c. 129 d.C.) was one of the most prominent and influent thinkers who wrote in Greek Language, for he structured the foundations of a medicine which survived about 1500 years, Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 91.

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Thus, language and the crafts make it possible to defend the practicability of ancient skepticism as philosophy. Brito's meticulous analysis allows him to articulate the various works of Sextus Empiricus, thus demonstrating their relevance for accurate identification of inheritances and strategies. The careful attention to historical detail and the use of chronological tools provide convincing proof of the sophistication of ancient skepticism and the reconfigurations and distortions that the shadow of *apraxia* adopted in the modern period. Consequently, the book compels the reader to reconsider the notion of skeptical philosophy as a practicable orientation in the present day.

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Recebido em: abril de 2025.
Aprovado em: junho de 2025.