

## Can the Pyrrhonian Skeptic Be Moral?

This paper will examine two interconnected questions regarding (1) the Pyrrhonian skeptic's status as a moral agent and (2) their capacity for moral action. I begin by taking seriously the characterization of the skeptic as espoused by Sextus Empiricus in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (our only fully extant Pyrrhonian skeptic and our primary source for their philosophical practices), namely, that the skeptic is one who (a) suspends judgment (*epechesthai*) on all matters, and thus (b) lives entirely without beliefs (*adoxastos*), particularly beliefs about what is good and bad (as Sextus repeatedly and emphatically writes). I then turn to the first of the two interconnected questions, whether the Pyrrhonian skeptic is capable of functioning as a moral agent. In other words, I survey along what dimensions the Pyrrhonist is a fitting object of *moral evaluation*. For the purposes of this paper, I understand the notion of being a fitting object of moral evaluation quite broadly (i.e., I am *not* staking a claim about what the *specific* requirements are for a person to function as a moral agent), and thus I consider whether the Pyrrhonist is, for example, an appropriate target for directing our reactive attitudes or emotions (e.g. gratitude, resentment, indignation, forgiveness, shame, guilt, particular forms of love, etc.); whether they are agents for whom notions of moral responsibility are applicable; and whether they are “reasons-responsive” in the domain of moral action (i.e., whether they are appropriately sensitive to the rational considerations that bear on their actions). I next turn to the second question, whether the skeptic is capable of performing moral actions. I intend this question not just to reflect whether the skeptic is capable of *being* a moral agent, but also to be a question of *what kinds* of moral action the Pyrrhonist is likely to perform—whether the skeptic is more likely to perform actions that are morally praiseworthy or morally blameworthy.

The issue of whether the skeptic is capable of acting *at all* has been hotly debated since antiquity, even garnering its own moniker, “the *apraxia* charge” (e.g., Burnyeat 1980; Vogt 2010). Contemporary philosophers have offered compelling arguments for thinking the Pyrrhonist is fully capable of action (e.g., Ribiero 2002). However, the narrower issue of whether the skeptic can act morally has received less attention (some exceptions being Machuca 2011 and Bett 2019). Even those philosophers who have defended the skeptics as agents capable of performing actions generally have been highly doubtful of their ability to function as moral agents or perform moral actions. This is because many philosophers seem to be relying on an underlying intuition that holding beliefs is a necessary condition for both moral agency and moral action. In contrast, I argue that the *adoxastos* Pyrrhonist is capable not only of functioning as a moral agent, but also that they are likely to perform praiseworthy moral actions no less reliably than their dogmatic belief-holding counterparts (say, the Stoics or the Epicureans). Moreover, I propose that we have good reason to suspect that the Pyrrhonist will reliably perform morally praiseworthy actions with regard to sociopolitical issues. To support the idea that the Pyrrhonist can be a moral agent and perform moral actions without belief, I focus on the role that *preferences* play in the Pyrrhonist’s decision-making practices, and argue that while preferences are distinctly different than and not grounded in belief, they nevertheless can be stable and persistent enough in the Pyrrhonist to inform their actions in a way which is both reliable and predictable. I then suggest that the sorts of preferences the Pyrrhonist has that are relevant to the moral domain will be of a sort that will frequently lead them to perform actions we find morally praiseworthy, or at the very least morally acceptable. Consequently, I assert that the Pyrrhonist can be a robust (though certainly atypical) moral agent whose preferences (and

practices) give us reason to be cautiously optimistic about viewing at least some elements of their philosophical way of life as morally praiseworthy.

### Bibliography

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