BEYOND THE THEORETIKOS BIOS:
PHILOSOPHY AND PRAXIS IN SEXTUS EMPIRICUS

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I

‘In the eyes of philosophers who spoke in the name of the thinking ego, it had always been the curse of contingency that condemned the realm of merely human affairs to a rather low status in the ontological hierarchy. But before the modern age, there had existed—not many but a few—well-trodden escape routes, at least for philosophers. In antiquity, there was the bios theoretikos: the thinker dwelt in the neighborhood of things necessary and everlasting, partaking in their Being to the extent that this is possible for mortals’.¹

Whatever the merits of Arendt’s judgement here, and its reliability, it seems to me that it bears witness to that pervasive line of thought which holds that the primary constitutive element attributed to human beings—that of contemplative activity—is also the ultimate dimension of our life.

This is not, however, the field of enquiry of this paper. I will rather be concerned with the critical attitude to this view to be found in certain significant passages of Sextus Empiricus’ writings. My analysis will be particularly directed to two thematic cores: the first relating to the destructive aspect of the Sceptical polemic, the second, inversely, setting out to delineate the positive solution contained in this—a solution that was legitimately claimed, I contend, by ancient Pyrrhonism in its most mature phase.

Against this background, I will therefore attempt to examine, in order:

¹ Arendt (1978) 2.27. This statement seems to echo the well known central digression in the Theaetetus (172c–177c) and hence refer to a Platonic tradition lato sensu, as well as to Aristotle (see Gerson [2004], and with regard to the organization of the school, Natali [1991]; as regards Theophrastus, see Bénatouil’s contribution in this volume). For an analysis of the concept of θεωρία within this tradition see—at least—Festugière (1936) and Nightingale (2004); and for an introduction to the different positions with respect to the ideal of the contemplative life, see Jaeger (1948/1928); Boll (1950); Grilli (1953); Joly (1956); Rausch (1982). I would also cautiously refer to Redlow (1966) and Blumenberg (1987).
– Sextus’ reappraisal of the role of any possible contemplation/θεωρία that is linked to dogmatic philosophical claims; and, more particularly, his opposition to the contentions of the Stoics, including those of an ethical and practical order, and to their negative implications;
– his delineation of a legitimate use of cognitive efforts which, whilst not attaining to any definitive or absolute conclusion, will nonetheless allow for the construction of an alternative epistemological model; one that is capable of representing not only a satisfactory interaction in relation to the world, but also a ‘theoretical’ point of reference for our actions.

II

It will therefore firstly be necessary to seek out from within the Sextan corpus those passages in which the theoretical approach to reality becomes—indirectly, but with a certain solidity—the objective of the Pyrrhonist critique.

When moving in this direction, what becomes immediately evident is that Sextus’ polemic grows sharper the moment he sets out to dismantle the eudaimonistic claims relating to the so-called ‘art of living’ or τέχνη περί τὸν βίον.

Without ever directly addressing the question of the contemplative life construed as an end in itself—that can neither be superseded by other ends nor be functional to them—Sextus chooses to take issue with another notion, one that is not so much Platonic or Aristotelian as Hellenistic or post-Hellenistic: that of θεωρία, understood as the cognitive background to action which is correct, right, or good. In the eyes of the dogmatists (Sextus’ polemical targets), a moral discourse that is productive of happiness can be counted legitimate if and only if it rests on strong theoretical conclusions regarding the nature of reality (on what a Sceptic would call ‘non-evident/unclear objects’, τὰ ἄδηλα), both on the ontological plane lato sensu and on that of the essence of true and absolute values or disvalues.²

² For the position of Antiochus of Ascalon on this question, see Cic. De fin. 5.58 (where ‘consideratio cognitioque rerum caelestium et earum, quas a natura occultatas et latentes indagare ratio potest …’ is discussed) and, above all, Bénatouïl (2009).

³ Note Sextus’ programmatic consideration in Adv. math. 11.2, where Socrates is presented as the first philosopher who assumed such an attitude. On this question, see also Spinelli (1995) 143–144 and Bett (1997) 48–49.