

Taking the Measure of Porchat, Now that he can be Read in English

In the last decade or more, I have made several visits to Brazil, giving talks for Brazilian philosophers and discussing a number of topics with them, particularly in the area of skepticism. I have found these interactions very enlightening, and one of the main reasons for this has been that in Brazil skepticism, and in particular the variety of skepticism associated with Sextus Empiricus – Pyrrhonian skepticism, as it is usually called – is viewed as still very much a live option, rather than a philosophical outlook of merely historical interest, as it tends to be viewed by Anglophone philosophers. I have come to be more sympathetic to this point of view: whereas I used to think of Pyrrhonian skepticism as out of step with any reasonable contemporary worldview, I can now see that – perhaps with some adaptation of certain features, but without abandoning anything essential to it – it is an outlook that can still be taken seriously.

When I first visited Brazil, the name Oswaldo Porchat was not familiar to me. But I quickly learned that he was generally viewed as the philosopher who, more than anyone else, had stimulated the wide interest in skepticism there and elsewhere in Latin America, including the widespread tendency to regard it as a live option. However, because he wrote only in Portuguese, I did not have the opportunity to explore his views in any depth; as far as I am aware, until now only “On what appears” was available in English translation.¹ I once had the privilege of meeting Porchat – as it happened, only a couple of months before the end of his life – but it was a small informal dinner and, although his English was fine (he had spent time as a visiting scholar at Berkeley early in his career), we did not really talk about philosophy; he was more interested in telling stories about,

¹ *Sképsis* 12 (2015), 2-33.

for example, his time in Russia in the era of Stalin – stories that the others present told me afterwards not to take too seriously.

But now, some years later, I am finally in a position to take the measure of Porchat the neo-Pyrrhonian. With the translation into English of a large number of his papers spanning several decades, the situation is very different from before, and those of us who are not fluent in Portuguese can come to know Porchat's variety of skepticism in detail. In addition – and this, I think, is equally interesting – we can get a sense of how this skepticism originated, since several of the earlier papers belong to a pre-skeptical phase and express positions that, while related to one another and to the eventual skeptical outlook, differ in various respects among themselves. In what follows, I will draw attention to a number of aspects of his philosophy that strike me as being of particular interest and raise questions about some of them.

I

Two related themes seem to have preoccupied Porchat throughout his career. The first is the inevitable and irresolvable conflict among philosophies – or at least, among philosophies adopted and practiced as they usually have been, with the pretension to be capturing how things really are in themselves. Every such philosophy, as he sees the matter, has its own fundamental assumptions and its own favored methods of argumentation, and any attempt to resolve the conflict can only proceed from some such assumptions and with some such methods, which cannot themselves be justified except *within* one of these frameworks. The second is the question whether, given this situation, there is any legitimate place for *philosophy* at all, and if so, what this philosophy will look like. Eventually, the second question is answered from within Porchat's neo-Pyrrhonism, but it is answered in at least two different ways in the essays that precede this phase.

In the first paper in the volume, “The conflict of philosophies” from 1968, the prominence of the first theme is obvious from the title. Porchat touches on the skepticism of Sextus Empiricus, interestingly grouping it with sophistry and treating both as opposed to the mainstream of Greek philosophy, which is construed as dogmatic. I have suggested elsewhere that this sort of picture of the sophists may be a product of the very incomplete information we have about them; they are known to have had numerous theoretical interests, and the emphasis in our surviving sources on their rhetorical activities may give us a distorted impression of them.² Nevertheless, there is good reason to see them as preoccupied with human questions rather than with the nature of the universe, and as suspicious of philosophical enterprises such as Parmenides’; so the picture of them as having intellectual common ground with the Pyrrhonian skeptics is by no means without merit. Now, Porchat does not spend much time on the skeptics and the sophists in this essay, being inclined to think of them as something of a sideline in the history of philosophy. He does, however, seem to think of them as *part* of the history of philosophy, being as committed as any dogmatic philosopher to “the magic power of argumentation and discourse” (p.17);³ and this explains why he does not express any affiliation with them. For in this essay, his own reaction to the unresolvable conflict of philosophies is to give up on philosophy. This rejection of philosophy is not to be argued for philosophically; that too would be just another exercise of philosophical dogmatism, convincing only to those who share its fundamental assumptions. Instead, Porchat advocates a “non-philosophic and philosophically unjustifiable refusal of philosophy” (p.19). He suggests in closing that this may not be possible for everyone; some people are just too entrenched in philosophy. But saying goodbye to philosophy is the only responsible option.

² See Bett 2020, 187-9.

³ **I cite the words of Porchat using the pagination as it appears on my computer in the draft translations of his papers that I have received. These references will need to be updated for the published volume.**

I am not sure this is quite as distinct from Sextus' position as Porchat suggests. I have argued elsewhere that Sextus is intentionally ambiguous about whether he is engaged in philosophy. If philosophy is understood as the dogmatists conceive it – and this is close to Porchat's formulations in terms of the dominance of the *Logos* – then, like Porchat in this essay, Sextus will not call himself a philosopher. On the other hand, he wants to leave open the possibility of a more open-ended conception of philosophy that would count him too as a philosopher.⁴ I regard Porchat's shifting perspectives on the prospects for philosophy, in the face of the unresolvable conflict among dogmatic versions of it, as a very interesting echo of Sextus' ambivalence on the subject, and I will return to this issue. However, I take the point that Sextus continues to engage enthusiastically in philosophical argumentation (albeit without any commitment to its foundational assumptions), and in this earliest phase Porchat clearly wants to get away from this, and therefore from philosophy itself, altogether.⁵

This has clearly changed by the time of his next paper, and again the title, "Preface to a philosophy" (1975), immediately brings this out. Again we have the opening emphasis on the unresolvable conflict among philosophies, presented now as part of an intellectual autobiography that describes his entry into philosophy as a by-product of his youthful religious faith – many of us can probably identify with this experience – but continues in disillusionment with philosophy given that each philosophy can only argue from within its own presuppositions. We hear of Porchat's sense of Sextus' skepticism as unsatisfactory – it holds on to the project of philosophical investigation (p.28)⁶ – and of his turning away from philosophy; this seems to correspond to the

⁴ I have touched on this in several of the essays in Bett 2019a, especially 2019b.

⁵ Plínio Smith's Introduction to this volume interestingly relates this early outlook to the structuralism that Porchat absorbed during his graduate studies in France. Having had little exposure to structuralism myself, I will leave it to others to assess this aspect.

⁶ It also limits itself to the *phainomenon* and professes not to have beliefs. I take this to express an interpretation of Sextus that Porchat later rejected; more on this later.

position of the first paper. But now there is a new development. Some time after having become a “common man” (p.29) and adopting a “view of the World in the manner of an ordinary person” (p.31), he comes to the realization that to refuse the title of “philosophy” for the careful use of everyday critical reasoning, which can very well be a development of this ordinary person’s perspective, is to concede too much to the traditional philosophers, the “priests of the *Logos*”: why should *they* be the ones to determine what does and does not count as philosophy? So he now decides to take this “non-philosophy *philosophically*, to confer philosophical citizenship on [his] critical view as a common man” (pp.33-4). The rest of this paper, as well as the next, “Philosophy and the common view of the world” (1979), which is explicitly intended as a clarification and extension of it, develop this new endorsement of a kind of philosophy that does not buy into the traditional assumptions.

I must confess that I do not fully understand what this kind of philosophy is supposed to amount to. It is “a human project, irremediably contingent and precarious” and “fully aware of its particularity”, but it nonetheless “makes itself metaphysical” (pp.34-5). It presents itself as nothing more than mortal opinion, yet it is engaged in “the pursuit of Truth and Objectivity” (capital letters in the original) and is concerned to make sure that it is “not vitiated and deformed by the necessary particularity of our perspective” – or, in other words, that it avoids being a “mere projection” (p.36). It “accepts as real ... in the metaphysical and strong sense of the term, what imposes itself as real to the common view” (p.53); thus “any project of legitimization” is simply “redundant”, since the World – or at least, those aspects of it about which there is general agreement, which are by no means its only aspects – is “a primary and absolute existence” (p.55). But all philosophies are “nothing but human discourses” or “more or less fortunate opinion practices” (p.56). Traditional philosophy is accused – with detailed arguments that have considerable weight – of rejecting the common view of the world and of succumbing to a certain kind of idealism; by contrast, with the

common view of the World understood as the starting point, it is emphasized that “philosophy *can now be done* [that is, done effectively or successfully] because it has a firm foundation” (p.67). As part of this newly effective variety of philosophy, traditional philosophical problems can be dealt with (as, apparently, they could not before), either by being solved or by being exposed as pseudo-problems (p.68). Yet the common view of the World, as held by people who have not engaged with philosophy, is not itself philosophical, and we cannot forget that philosophy has a history, which has shaped the way these problems have evolved (pp.68-9). Even so, “The philosophical promotion of the common view takes place above the conflict [between traditional philosophies] and the new philosophy will not join it” (p.72).⁷

How to fit this all together is very hard for me to see. The desire to move beyond philosophy of the speculative kind is clear. But what is being offered to replace it, and whether this is in fact something fully distinct from it is, to this reader at least, much less so. What is this “absolute” character that the common view of the World enjoys, or the “firm foundation” that it provides; and what does the “metaphysical character” of this new philosophy consist in? At one point (n.48) Porchat compares what he is proposing with Strawson’s “descriptive metaphysics”. But Strawson certainly did not conceive himself as renouncing previous philosophy or as operating “above the conflict” that it represents. Nor is it obvious how adopting the common view of the World as an unquestionable given and attempting to articulate it is not just one more example of the kind of philosophy Porchat claims to have renounced, despite his insistence that this is a merely “human project” and does not have the same aspirations.

⁷ In a closing footnote to “Philosophy and the common view of the world” (n.51), Porchat says that he had not fully appreciated this last point when he wrote “Preface to a philosophy” and wrongly implied in that paper that the new philosophy would still be involved in the conflict with the philosophies of the old kind. I must confess that I do not see where this occurs.

In view of this unclarity, it is perhaps not surprising that, in the next essay, “Common knowledge and scepticism” (1986), Porchat seems to have reverted to something like the picture in the 1968 essay, “The conflict of philosophies”. It again starts with the trope of living common life without philosophy. But this time, it stays there and the mindset of common life is never accorded the status of philosophy. As in the earlier essay, skepticism is treated as philosophical, but this time it receives much closer scrutiny. While Porchat acknowledges that Sextus speaks of the skeptic’s adherence to “common life”, he claims that this is in fact very different from the common life he himself identifies with, which includes a basic acceptance of the common view of the world. This is because he reads Sextus as challenging not only dogmatic philosophies, but also common life itself. On this reading, anyone who purports to say how things really are – and this includes the ordinary person as well as the dogmatic philosopher – is subject to the skeptical procedure of creating equally powerful opposing arguments. The result is a tentative, stand-offish view of the everyday world that has been endemic in philosophy. Porchat cites a book by Ernest Gellner that situates this view in philosophy since Descartes; but he claims that it can be traced back much earlier to the skepticism of Sextus Empiricus.

Further argument for this picture comes in the next essay, “Scepticism and the external world”, also from 1986. Porchat reads Sextus, like Descartes, as suspending judgment about the *existence* of the external world. He allows that it sometimes sounds as if Sextus is questioning our knowledge of the nature of the world around us, rather than its very existence (p.7); but in fact, according to him, Sextus’ position is clearly that the existence of external things is just as much in question as their nature. The fundamental reason for this is that Porchat reads Sextus’ *phainomena* as “appearances” in the sense of purely mental items, something akin to the “sense-data” that played an important role in mid-twentieth-century anglophone epistemology. To speak of an “appearance” in this way is not to refer to anything outside one’s mind; an “appearance” of a table

in front of one is simply a visual *impression as of* there being a table in front of one, with no commitment whatever concerning whether or not the table is actually there. And to adopt a conception of “appearances” of this kind is, as Porchat says, to buy into a very distinctive philosophical doctrine: that of the radical separation between mind and world, such that even one’s own body is categorized as “external”. (On this reading, therefore, the skeptic’s supposed universal suspension of judgment has at least one serious limitation.) But this doctrine, though it has been pervasive in modern philosophy – and, according to Porchat, also has antecedents in Sextus – is far from mandatory; it is a product of a particular set of moves in the history of philosophy that were by no means inevitable. Thus we need not follow the (not-so-skeptical) skeptic’s lead, and we need not regard the common view of the world with suspicion.

In proposing that the alleged problem of the existence of the external world is a historical product, not something that simply forces itself on any thinking person, Porchat is in good company. Michael Williams has argued for this over much of his career, most extensively in his book *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Skepticism*, first published in 1991.⁸ Porchat and Williams must have been thinking along similar lines at around the same time, unknown to one another. And a similar thought was expressed even before that in a famous article by Myles Burnyeat, “Idealism in Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed”, first given as a lecture to the Royal Institute of Philosophy in 1978.⁹ The crucial difference, however, is that both Williams and Burnyeat see the philosophical moves that make this problem seem inevitable as occurring with Descartes, not in the ancient world. And this is the position that Porchat, too, came to accept before too long.

⁸ Williams 1996.

⁹ Burnyeat 1982.

By the time of the next paper in the collection, “On what appears” (1991), Sextus’ *phainomena* are interpreted very differently. According to this new picture, what “appear” to the skeptic, most of the time at any rate, are *objects and events*, which present themselves to us as external to ourselves and as residing in a world in which we too reside (pp.106ff.). The skeptic sees no reason to question these appearances and certainly has no theory of mind or of the world with which to try to analyze them. They are simply what is given to us in everyday experience and the skeptic is happy to go along with them. Of course, if someone else comes along and offers a theory of their true nature, the skeptic will generate equally powerful opposing arguments to that theory and will suspend judgment – and perhaps, attempt to get its proponent to suspend judgment – about its truth or falsehood. I think it is fair to say that this reading of Sextus’ *phainomena* is today a generally accepted one, and I myself find it the most faithful to what Sextus says. While other scholars have occasionally flirted with the idea that ancient Pyrrhonism suspends judgment on the existence of the external world,¹⁰ most people would agree that this is not Sextus’ concern, and that he takes for granted, as within the scope of the *phainomena*, something like what Porchat, in the other papers we have looked at so far, called the common view of the world.

II

Now, at this point Porchat is not simply an observer of Pyrrhonian skepticism; he identifies with it himself, and this is true of all the remaining papers in the collection as well. In terms of the two central themes that I introduced at the start of the previous section, in his sense of the unending conflict among dogmatic philosophies he is at one with Sextus, and this topic recedes somewhat from these papers; it is assumed as a starting point and no longer needs to be discussed at any

¹⁰ See Fine 2003; Machuca 2013. Machuca acknowledges that Sextus does not make this explicit; but he concludes that there are places in Sextus’ work that point in this direction, and that, at least, a full appreciation of the implications of his position would have led him to suspend judgment on the existence of the external world (124).

length. But on the other issue – whether philosophy can be pursued within the skeptical outlook Porchat has now adopted, and if so, what is its character – there is a great deal to say. Here too, as in the pre-skeptical papers, his position on this issue does not seem to stay the same, even though the basic neo-Pyrrhonist outlook seems to be in most respects stable across the remaining papers. In this section, without looking at every paper in detail, I will focus on those features that seem to me most worthy of comment, whether that takes the form of approval or of questions, centering especially around the prospects for philosophy within skepticism.

“On what appears” seems to express a somewhat ambiguous position on this question, and the same seems to be true of the next couple of essays that follow it. It rejects the proposal to treat the common view of the world as itself a kind of philosophy not needing justification, as argued for in “Philosophy and the common view of the world”. When ordinary people make dogmatic statements, as Porchat acknowledges they sometimes do (p.94) – in this following Sextus (see especially *PH* 1.30) – one must suspend judgment about their claims, just as one does with the dogmatic claims of philosophers. But when this does not occur, the common view of the world has no philosophical import, and as Porchat says of those who share his outlook, “We Pyrrhonists delightfully recognize ourselves to be confined to this common terrain” (p.102). This is not to deny that the Pyrrhonist will engage in philosophical argumentation when presented with some dogmatic philosophy – this is discussed in much more detail in the next essay, “Scepticism and argumentation” (1993); but this is all in the service of inducing or maintaining suspension of judgment and does not include any endorsement of the forms of argument employed. So is skepticism itself a kind of philosophy? The idea of the Pyrrhonist as “confined” to the “common terrain” might suggest not, and the same is true when the Pyrrhonist is described as “freed from ... philosophical speculation” (p.120). On the other hand, Porchat speaks several times of “the sceptic

philosopher” (p.101 and elsewhere), and he describes the paper itself as laying out “my philosophical position” (p.121).

I think what this apparent ambiguity reflects is that the Pyrrhonian philosophy, as Porchat is here conceiving it, is a peculiar kind of philosophy; and here, I think, he is very close to Sextus. I mentioned earlier that in my view Sextus, too, is deliberately ambiguous about whether or not he is practicing philosophy. He regularly refers to what the dogmatists do as “so-called philosophy” (e.g., *PH* 1.6, 1.18, 2.205, 3.1), which implies both that what is regularly considered philosophy does not measure up to its own expectations and that he himself wants nothing to do with philosophy so understood. But he is quite prepared to speak of the skeptical philosophy (e.g., *PH* 1.5., 1.11, 2.6) and to contrast it with what he calls the “neighboring philosophies” (*PH* 1.5, 1.209). Despite the fact that he finds something dogmatic in all these viewpoints that have been taken to be similar or equivalent to skepticism, the clear implication is that there is a general heading “philosophy” under which these dogmatic viewpoints and his own skepticism both fall. And the same applies to the opening sentences of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, where Sextus speaks of three different kinds of philosophy: those that think they have discovered the truth, those that think the truth cannot be discovered, and those that are still investigating – with skepticism, of course, fitting the last description (*PH* 1.1-3). What this more capacious understanding of philosophy amounts to is never spelled out. But presumably a central component, if not the entirety of it, is precisely this “investigation”: that is, the careful and systematic consideration (which may or may not reach definite conclusions) of certain general issues about the nature of things and our place in the world, including about how far (if at all) we are in a position to understand these matters and the attitude we should take if we are not. It seems to me that Porchat, like Sextus, is operating with two conceptions of what philosophy is – a dogmatic conception and a broader conception that can

include skepticism – and that this explains why he, again like Sextus, seems to send mixed signals about whether he is doing philosophy.

The philosophy that he is doing – and, we can now add, that Sextus is doing – is peculiar, as I have suggested, because it is not aiming at discovery of the truth, as most philosophy is doing. Instead, it aims at keeping us fully aware of the unresolved (I think Porchat would say “unresolvable”) conflict among all philosophies of that type and the suspension of judgment that this forces on us, as well as at explaining the frame of mind this leads to concerning the human condition and the world in which we live. This latter project is much more prominent in Porchat, although it is certainly not absent from Sextus’ account.

In saying that Pyrrhonian philosophy, either in Sextus’ or in Porchat’s hands, does not aim at truth, I do not mean to suggest that the Pyrrhonist cannot speak of everyday claims or impressions as being true or false; I simply mean that, when one does so, one is not engaged in philosophy. To be clear, I am speaking here of the conception of philosophy that I find to be suggested in “On what appears”, in “Scepticism and argumentation”, and (I think) in “Truth, realism, scepticism”. And the idea stemming from this conception, that there is nothing wrong with speaking of truth and falsehood, so long as one is not speaking in a philosophical register, seems to me an important insight. But this is a place where Porchat and Sextus diverge. As Porchat says in the first two sections of “Truth, realism, scepticism” (and this too, I think, is an important insight), a strongly realist conception of truth was common ground in ancient Greek philosophy, and when Sextus subjects to skeptical critique the notions of a criterion of truth and of truth itself, this is the conception of truth with which he is operating. Furthermore, given the prevalence of this conception, Sextus himself was not willing to speak of truth *except* when critiquing the dogmatists on this subject; hence he simply avoids the term “truth” in discussing his acceptance of appearances in his everyday life.

In a later essay, “Empiricism and scepticism” (2004), Porchat comments again on this issue and revises his reading of Sextus, citing several passages that he now thinks do show Sextus using the words “true” and “false” in an everyday fashion (*M* 7.391, *M* 8.8, *M* 8.322-6 and a few others cited in nn.255 and 256). However, these are all in the context of his discussions of dogmatic theories of the criterion of truth, truth itself, and demonstration; in advancing arguments concerning these theories, he cannot be assumed to accept the assumptions behind these arguments. Porchat says (n.256) that in his earlier consideration of this matter, he took Sextus here to be arguing dialectically with the purpose of giving trouble to the dogmatists. I think he was right the first time. However, I concede that the later paper may be right that Sextus could occasionally allow himself the use of the words “true” and “false” in everyday contexts to refer to the claims or impressions that he accepts or does not accept. This is because he makes clear that the skeptics are not concerned about precise language (*PH* 1.207); hence he might well be unconcerned about occasionally using these words in ordinary discourse, despite their (to him) dogmatic implications.¹¹

In any case, whatever Sextus’ position on this, Porchat argues that this self-restriction – the refusal to use the words “true” and “false” except when scrutinizing dogmatic theories – is unnecessary, and on this point I am fully in accord with him. A great many of the ways things appear to us strike us as beyond question, as do a great many of the statements that we read or that we hear people say. All these can very well be referred to as “true”, while those that strike us as unacceptable can be referred to as “false”. We are not making any grand claims when we use this language; we are just acknowledging that the first group are, as far as we can tell, not open to question, while the opposite applies to the second group. By the same token, we can say that we

¹¹ I have discussed this in Bett 2024, 32-4 and accompanying endnotes.

have beliefs, and even, on some occasions, that we have certainty, all this being understood as applying “in our practical and daily life” (pp.109-10).

I also see Porchat’s point in saying that there is a mundane, everyday notion of truth as correspondence (pp.155-6). What we mean when we describe a statement as true is that things are as the statement says they are; or, in other words, that the statement *corresponds* to the way things are. The things we speak about are, much of the time at any rate, things out there in the world; to speak of them truly is to characterize them as they actually are, and there is no reason to object to our calling this a kind of correspondence between the statement and the objects it is about. And even if we are speaking about ourselves – for example, about our own mental or physical states – there is still a kind of correspondence, if what we are saying is true, between what we say and our actual mental or physical states. Suppose I say “I am hungry” or “I am depressed”. If I have not had a meal for many hours, it is likely that I actually am hungry, in which case the first statement will be true; if I have just had several pieces of bad news, it is likely that I actually am depressed, in which case the second statement will be true. But if I have just been treated to a meal in a restaurant after winning an important prize, both statements will almost certainly be false – that is, the actual state of affairs concerning me will not correspond to what I am saying. This is all very obvious, as it is meant to be. And none of it is in any way inconsistent with Pyrrhonian skepticism, since it is all about the regular world of everyday experience; none of it purports to capture the ultimate nature of things – which is what dogmatic philosophers claim to describe, and what the skeptic suspends judgment about. I must admit that, despite everything I have just said, I am a little nervous about the notion of truth as correspondence in this context, simply because this has traditionally been understood in the dogmatic philosophical register, as referring, precisely, to a correspondence with the way things are quite independent of our experience. However, as I say, I can see Porchat’s point

in putting it this way, and provided we are clear about what is meant and we stay within the common view of the world, there is no harm in it.

Porchat also says that “Pyrrhonism seems to us completely compatible with modern and contemporary scientific practice” (p.117), and here, I think, the matter becomes more complicated. Porchat construes science as Sextus construes *technê*, “craft” or “expertise” (pp.118-19, 143). Sextus includes *technai* as one of the four main categories of appearances by which a skeptic can shape his or her life (*PH* 1.21-4). A *technê* is a systematic set of practical procedures directed towards some useful end; this is a common understanding – the Stoics define it in essentially these terms – and Sextus has no reason to understand it any differently. Though he does not say this explicitly, we must surely assume that his own practice of medicine would have fallen under the heading of *technê*, and this fits well with his own Empiricist approach to medicine. Empiricists have developed techniques for healing patients based on experience; they have discovered what works, and what does not work, for curing fevers, setting broken bones, and so on. What the Empiricists do not do is attempt explanations for *why* the successful remedies are successful. Empiricism is purely a matter of practice, not a matter of theory. In a similar vein, and explicitly appealing to the notion of *technê*, Porchat proposes to think of science as “a human instrument for systematic exploration of the endless richness of the world of the phenomena, which the spectacular advances of technological progress connected to scientific practice can make serve the well-being of humans” (p.120).

But this is a questionable and, some would say, impoverished conception of science. I once heard the Dean of Engineering at my university explain the difference between engineering and natural science by saying that in engineering the aim is always to arrive at some practical outcome or product, whereas this is not necessarily true in natural science. On a related note, one might argue that Porchat is treating natural science as if it was engineering, which of course makes use of

scientific findings, but is interested in what can be done with these findings, rather than in the science *per se*. For another way to think of science is that it is concerned, precisely, with something *beyond* “the world of the phenomena” (to repeat Porchat’s phrase); it is concerned with the underlying nature of things, with what is going on in the world at the most fundamental level, which is very different from anything in the realm of the apparent. Porchat says, quite rightly, that Sextus (and Greek philosophers in general) thought of science, or the study of *phusis*, as aspiring to knowledge of the real nature of things, which explains why he suspends judgment about all questions of that kind and treats science and *technê* as two quite different things. It is by no means obvious that we should not continue to do the same. I have argued that Pyrrhonism, understood as suspension of judgment about all questions concerning the nature of things, is no longer an option for us, because, as I have provocatively put it, we know too much, especially in the natural sciences; for example, we understand electricity, which is not merely a practical device for turning on lights, operating microwaves, etc., but an *explanation* for *why* lights come on and microwaves heat food when they do, an explanation that appeals to the real nature of things.¹² To this it may be replied that we are still in the realm of the apparent: that electricity works as it does was shown by repeated experiments, and these are as much part of the phenomenal world as the lights and the microwaves themselves. But the counter-response will be that while the experimental results may be apparent, the underlying processes they reveal are not; rather, they are to be inferred, and the inferences involve substantial bodies of theory. In other words, we are dealing here with what Sextus calls indicative signs, not recollective signs: that is, signs that allow us to infer from the evident to the non-evident. And, contrary to what Sextus suggests about ancient science, modern science has been very successful at this. When it comes to electricity, there is perhaps a plausible case to be made on both sides of this question. But when it comes to the fundamental constituents

¹² See Bett 2019c, 2019d.

of matter, at the level of quarks, it is very hard for me to see that they are anywhere near the domain of “what appears” – unless, that is, one adopts a strictly instrumentalist conception of what science is.

Given this, I find it surprising that Porchat insists, near the end of “On what appears”, that the Pyrrhonist is not required to adopt “a conventionalist, operationalist or even pragmatic ... perspective” on science (p.119). On the contrary, he is open to accepting (*ibid.*) “that the so-called theoretical terms of a given scientific theory correspond to ‘entities’ and that its theoretical propositions have a ‘descriptive’ component”, so long as these are not understood metaphysically. Indeed, he even allows the possibility (though without finally endorsing it) that the Pyrrhonist could be a scientific realist – again, so long as this is not understood in metaphysical terms. But this seems to me hard to understand. Theoretical entities, on a straightforward understanding of this language, would seem to be entities that are inferred from observations, but that are not themselves susceptible to observation. Whether or not one adopts the word “metaphysical” to refer to such entities, they are by definition not part of “what appears”. Or rather, they are not part of what appears unless one interprets talk of such entities as reducible to talk of the observations that inspire one to posit them – in which case we have abandoned realism and are back with some form of instrumentalism. The fact that Porchat consistently puts the words “entities”, “descriptive” and “describes” in quotation marks in this passage suggests that he is not in fact thinking of these notions in the ways one would need to, in order to sign on to any genuine form of realism.

This is not the only place, however, where realism makes an appearance in these essays, and “Truth, Realism, Scepticism” (1995) is another place where Porchat puts his cards on the table in the title itself. In this paper we again have the idea that a Pyrrhonian can happily speak of truth, and of a correspondence, when one says things that are true, between what one says and what is the case, all this being understood in trivial everyday terms (pp.188-92). But now this is also

associated with what Porchat calls “sceptical realism” (pp.177-8), this being a view that is now not limited to science but applies to true statements in general. As before, Porchat acknowledges that Sextus does not speak in this way, because the notion of truth, for him, was too closely associated with a dogmatic conception of grasping the way things are in themselves. But while I can see the merit in a Pyrrhonist reclaiming the notion of truth, understood in an everyday, non-theoretical way, and even perhaps the notion of correspondence, “sceptical realism” has, for me, the feel of an oxymoron. This is because, unlike “truth” and perhaps even “correspondence”, “realism” is an essentially theoretical term; there is no everyday, mundane use of the term “realism” – except to refer, in practical contexts, to a hard-headed willingness to face facts, which is quite different from what we are considering here. Realism, as applied to the notion of truth, is a certain type of theoretical view about what it is for a statement to be true: it says that a statement is true that captures how things really are. And “how things really are” is generally understood in dogmatic terms. Now, Porchat insists that his realism is “pre-philosophical” (pp.203-4), that it does not go beyond what anyone would normally understand in talking of some set of remarks as being true. I can see what he means.¹³ Just as, in the Tarskian formula (to which much appeal is made in this paper), “snow is white” is true if and only if snow is white, we might say that “snow is white” is true in as much as it’s really the case that snow is white. What I do not see is that there is any *point* in using the term “realism” to capture this. If the talk of realism is not to slide back into dogmatism, it must convey no more than what is conveyed by the term “true” itself, understood in the mundane,

¹³ Whether he actually sticks to this policy is, however, another question. For having introduced the notion of “sceptical realism” in this paper, he goes on explain it by appeal to the relativity of perceptions, borrowing from Putnam the phrase “objectivity for us” and glossing this as “relative objectivity” and as intersubjectivity (p.197). Though he twice stresses that this is not an “easy relativism” (pp.195, 198), it is hard not to see this as a relativism of some kind (and the point of the qualification “easy” is not clear); in any case, it looks philosophical rather than pre-philosophical, and arguably dogmatic (though not, of course, *realist* in the traditional dogmatic sense; on the contrary, realism receives a major philosophical makeover). A truly pre-philosophical mindset will not be either realist or relativist – as, indeed, Porchat seems to recognize in saying that it is “indifferent ... with respect to ... metaphysical or epistemological positions” (pp.203-4). Thanks to Plínio Smith for discussion of this matter.

everyday fashion. It carries the ever-present risk of being misunderstood in dogmatic terms, while offering no information that could not be provided by simply speaking of truth (and, if one must, correspondence). To my mind, one does better, from within a Pyrrhonist perspective, to avoid talk of realism altogether, except when speaking of dogmatic views.¹⁴

In calling his form of realism “pre-philosophical”, Porchat seems still to be retaining a conception of philosophy in which it is confined to dogmatic theories, which was one of the two, somewhat different conceptions of philosophy that I detected in “On what appears”. The other conception, to recall, was one in which one could speak of skeptical philosophy, but in which this applied to exposition of the skeptic’s attitudes: this will include an exposition of the skeptical attitude towards dogmatic philosophy, including suspension of judgment concerning all questions addressed by dogmatic philosophy, but also an exposition of the resulting everyday attitude taken by the skeptic towards the apparent. On neither of the two conceptions suggested in “On what appears” is there a place for anything one can call “philosophy” from *within* the skeptic’s everyday attitude; and Porchat’s labeling his skeptical realism “pre-philosophical” seems to be another example of this stance. However, I must admit that his interest, in “Truth, Realism, Scepticism”, in using the terminology of realism seems to me another kind of ambivalence on this score; he seems to want to be doing something tantamount to philosophy without actually doing philosophy.

He also seems, at one point in this paper, to be trying to pull Sextus in the same direction. While conceding that Sextus does not claim to have *epistêmê*, and is nervous about speaking of

¹⁴ It looks as if Porchat came to think the same. Except for two passing comments – that the Pyrrhonist has abandoned *metaphysical* realism (“Pyrrhonian scepticism and philosophical problems”, p.238) and that “realism”, like a lot of other “-isms”, is difficult to define (“Empiricism and scepticism”, p.286) – the term “realism”, in the papers after “Truth, Realism, Scepticism”, only ever appears in back-references to that paper itself. The talk of *relativity* still occurs in the later papers (see the previous footnote), but the labels “realism” and “skeptical realism” seem to have been dropped. Plínio Smith has told me that concerning science, too, he moved away from realism to a kind of instrumentalism; apparently he intended to write another paper about science, but never did so.

truth, he claims that Sextus does speak of skeptical “dogmas” and skeptical “doctrines” (pp.177-8), the point being that much of the standard philosophical terminology can be retained within the skeptical outlook, allowing for something like a skeptical counterpart of philosophy as traditionally practiced. This seems to me a mistake. Porchat is using “dogma” for the Greek word *dogma*. The passage on *dogma* is *PH* 1.13, which is on the question whether the skeptic has *dogmata*, and which alludes to an ambiguity in the word: *dogma* can refer simply to something that seems (*dokei*) a certain way to someone, or it can refer to theories about “unclear” matters investigated in the sciences. In the latter sense, Sextus says, the skeptic does not have *dogmata* – these are precisely what skeptical suspension of judgment is about – but in the former sense, there is nothing wrong with speaking of the skeptic’s *dogmata*. However, in this sense, a *dogma* is simply something that seems (or in Porchat’s preferred terminology, “appears”) a certain way to the skeptic; the word in this usage has none of the connotations of the word “dogma” in English (or, I am told, in Portuguese), which strongly suggests definite views or doctrines. I prefer the translation “doctrine” for *dogma* in Sextus, while allowing that, in this one place (there are no other passages where he uses the word in the weak sense of “what seems”), “doctrine” does not fit. In any case, there are no skeptical “dogmas” in any quasi-philosophical sense. As for Porchat’s use of “doctrine”, this stands for *hairesis*, which literally means “choice”, but was regularly used to refer to a philosophical school. Sextus considers whether skepticism is a *hairesis* (*PH* 1.16-17) and says that if by *hairesis* one means a dogmatic philosophical position, the answer is no, but that if one means “an approach that follows a certain rationale in line with what appears, where that rationale indicates how it is possible to seem to live properly ... and extends to the ability to suspend judgment, we say that [the skeptic] does have a *hairesis*; for we do follow a certain rationale that, in line with what appears, marks out a life for us that fits with ancestral customs and the laws and the culture and our own

reactions” (1.17). This is simply a sketch of the regular skeptical approach; there is nothing here resembling “doctrine” in any normal sense of the term.

Be that as it may, Porchat seems at this point to be coming close to proposing a kind of philosophy that can be done from *within* the skeptical outlook, where this does not simply consist in challenging dogmatic positions and suspending judgment about them, but involves the skeptic’s own positive contributions on philosophical issues. And by the time of the next paper, “Pyrrhonian Scepticism and Philosophical Problems” (1996), this comes into the open. Much of this paper is a very interesting comparison between the Pyrrhonian skeptic’s approach and the common practice in recent philosophy of rejecting certain philosophical problems as pseudo-problems. Porchat comes to the conclusion that skeptical suspension of judgment can be seen as applying not just to dogmatic philosophical positions themselves, but also to “the very legitimacy of the discourse that produces them, and therefore of the problems it formulates and aims to solve” (pp.224-5). He adds that this may seem very close to contemporary dismissals of philosophical problems as pseudo-problems. But he cautions that there is a crucial difference, namely that these dismissals usually themselves operate from within a dogmatic framework and that, when they do not – he suggests that this may be the case with the later Wittgenstein – it is not made clear enough that this is so. However, the possibility of rejecting dogmatism without buying into dogmatic assumptions is definitely open, and this points towards a skeptical philosophy: a philosophy that does not merely consist of undermining dogmatic philosophy, nor of describing the skeptic’s attitude – these two being the extent of the skeptic’s philosophy as suggested in the previous few essays – but that, in its own right, examines and tries to solve a wide range of philosophical problems that “can be recognised as legitimate by scepticism” (p.232), because they are not the kind of issues about which the skeptic would feel the need to suspend judgment. This is clearly beyond anything Sextus

would have allowed. But Porchat could respond that that is simply because Sextus is only able to conceive of positive philosophical activity in a dogmatic register.

Porchat gives a number of examples of philosophical questions that can be addressed from within the skeptical outlook and while always avoiding a dogmatic perspective, including the following: the nature of knowledge, whether we can speak of truth as correspondence, whether a skeptically consistent science can posit unobservable entities or must adopt some form of instrumentalism, and how to understand the nature of moral values (pp.238-9). It is interesting that this list includes some of the questions on which I have already expressed some reservation about positions Porchat himself took in previous papers – precisely because of the risk they seemed to take of sliding into dogmatism. Still, in now positing this kind of philosophy-within-skepticism, he is clearly sensitive to the risk and to the care with which such questions must be approached. Besides, there will be other questions that are not on this list. He stresses that many philosophical problems can only be addressed from within a dogmatic framework; and these, of course, the skeptic will avoid – and will probably reject as pseudo-problems. Indeed, much of the skeptic’s philosophical project, he suggests, will amount to a “translation” of dogmatic philosophical discourse back into the ordinary discourse of humanity. This sounds quite reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s concern with spotting when “language goes on holiday” (*Philosophical Investigations*, Part 1, Remark 38).

So now, once again Porchat conceives of himself as practicing philosophy, this time within the suspensive skeptical stance; this is the final phase of his long and complicated evolution concerning the prospects for philosophy. And the scope of this philosophy seems only to grow in the remaining papers in the collection. In “It is still necessary to be a sceptic” (2000), we hear of a negative and a positive aspect to the skeptical philosophy. The negative aspect is the critique of dogmatism and the resulting suspension of judgment about all questions addressed in a dogmatic

manner; the positive aspect is a broadly empiricist attitude, which can be considered as simply a generalization of the attitude embodied in *technê*.¹⁵ The new suggestion in this paper, which I find quite striking, is that much contemporary philosophy is in fact skeptical in character without realizing it. The reason it does not realize this is because when it thinks of skepticism, it has in mind the modern variety, which is in fact dogmatic – a theme we touched on earlier. But there is an anti-absolutist thrust to much contemporary philosophy, and this means that it is broadly in line with the positive skeptical philosophy Porchat is proposing. At one point he even says that, since this philosophy is really no more than the full exercise of critical reason, we should regard skepticism as “the most authentic representative ... of the most fundamental and basic proposal of Western philosophy” (p.261). In the same essay we are introduced to the idea of the whole history of (again, presumably, Western) philosophy as “an eternal struggle between two antagonistic and irreconcilable ways of philosophizing” (p.262): one aspiring to a God’s-eye view, which is represented by dogmatism, and another content to explore the human perspective, which is pre-eminently represented by Pyrrhonian skepticism. This theme, along with the idea that a great deal of contemporary philosophy belongs on the same side of this divide as skepticism, is further pursued in the next two essays, “The self-critique of reason in the ancient world” (2004), where sophistry again makes an appearance, alongside skepticism and empiricism, as an honored example of human-style philosophizing, and “Empiricism and scepticism” (also 2004).

“The madness argument” (2003) offers an interesting extra line of support for this picture. Porchat argues that, had Descartes pursued his reflections on madness in the *First Meditation* more single-mindedly than he did, it would have undermined his entire project: if thinking, as well

¹⁵ It was suggested to me that Porchat was perhaps trying to improve or enhance the notion of *technê*, including with a Popperian notion of induction. I cannot follow up on this except to say that, if so, this is a good example of his sympathetically refashioning for his own purposes the materials he got from Sextus.

as the senses, is suspect, how could a project of gaining certainty ever get started? And this point seems completely general; the thought that one might be mad threatens to put into doubt any reasoning whatever, either philosophical or everyday. The moral of this, he continues, is that we need to reduce our ambitions and to accept that no argument is *absolutely* reliable. In other words, we need to make do with the *appearances*, as best we can judge them. Hence the way to deal with the madness argument is to embrace a neo-Pyrrhonian skepticism. The madness argument can thus be seen as a rebuttal of any absolutist program in philosophy; it shows that “Our mind does not venture beyond itself, except on the wings of myth”, and that, by contrast, “philosophizing on the ground is essential” (pp.335-6).

III

The contrast between these two styles of philosophy is clearly an important one, and the notion that skepticism is an example of the on-the-ground, human style clearly makes sense. The extent to which contemporary philosophy is on the same side, as Porchat proclaims much of it to be, seems to me less clear – which is the subject of this, the last main section of my paper. Porchat does not go into any detail about which philosophers, or which traditions of philosophy, he has in mind when he says this. Limiting myself to the contemporary philosophical tradition with which I am most familiar, anglophone analytic philosophy,¹⁶ it is certainly true that the “eternal struggle” of which Porchat speaks has been a matter of central interest to several prominent philosophers of the past half-century. The aspiration of philosophy to achieve a God’s-eye view, together with the unavailability of any such perspective and the possible incoherence of even considering it, was the subject of Thomas Nagel’s book *The View from Nowhere*.¹⁷ This was also a recurring preoccupation

¹⁶ Which was no doubt at least one of the traditions Porchat had in mind; he was certainly familiar with many of the leading figures in analytic philosophy – see Smith (no date).

¹⁷ Nagel 1986.

in the work of Barry Stroud, from *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* to his last book-length work, *Engagement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction*, and in a great many of his essays.¹⁸ And one can perhaps find a somewhat different version of it in Wilfrid Sellars' concern, expressed most famously in "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man", with the split between what he calls the "manifest image" and the "scientific image", and how to give both of them their due.¹⁹ But these, of course, are not the same as Porchat's model of philosophy inspired by Pyrrhonian-style insights and resolutely confining itself to the human perspective – even though, in the case of both Nagel and Stroud, reflections on skepticism play an important role. For, while Nagel and Stroud accept the unavailability of the God's-eye view, there is a pervasive sense of regret – or, to use Stroud's own term, dissatisfaction – over this state of affairs, as if philosophy has been revealed as somehow *less* than it purported to be.²⁰ As for Sellars, the scientific image is *not*, as he sees it, out of our reach; it is just fundamentally different from the manifest image, and difficult to see how to relate to it.²¹

A contemporary philosopher who fits Porchat's model very well, I think, is Amie Thomasson. In books such as *Ordinary Objects* and *Easy Ontology*,²² Thomasson has promoted a common sense view of the world, and central to this project has been a sharp focus on when, and for what purposes, metaphysical principles can legitimately be employed. If philosophers argue, as recent metaphysicians have sometimes done, that objects such as tables and chairs do not exist, this is a case where metaphysics has gone wild. The case for this conclusion in *Ordinary Objects* is detailed and meticulous – Thomasson is certainly not stepping away from philosophical argumentation –

¹⁸ Stroud 1984; Stroud 2011. Related themes are addressed in a number of the essays in Stroud 2000 and Stroud 2018.

¹⁹ Sellars 1963.

²⁰ For another perspective on Stroud that, while not denying anything I have said here, sees in his work an approach to philosophy (once the metaphysical dissatisfaction has been acknowledged and put aside) that is closer to Porchat's neo-Pyrrhonism, see Smith 2016.

²¹ This also seems to be a very different conception of science from Porchat's *technê*-centered conception.

²² Thomasson 2007; Thomasson 2015.

but the outcome is a worldview in which we can say without embarrassment all the kind of things about the world that we ordinarily do say. Thomasson sees herself as the heir to Carnap, Wittgenstein and other early-to-mid-twentieth century philosophers concerned with, in her words from the Introduction to *Easy Ontology*, “distinguishing sense from nonsense” (8); in the same context she quotes Wittgenstein’s remark about language going on holiday.

Recently she has turned her attention to metaethics, with the same goal of vindicating our ordinary ways of talking. (Recall that the nature of moral values was on Porchat’s list of the kinds of topics that could be addressed within his skeptical philosophy.) Specifically, this takes the form of vindicating the idea that there are such things as moral truths (“torturing babies is wrong”, for example), but without our having to venture into obscure questions about moral ontology. In one of Thomasson’s recent papers (coauthored with Mark Warren), “Prospects for a Quietist Moral Realism” – that is, a moral realism without metaphysical pretensions – Pyrrhonian skepticism is actually mentioned as an early example of the “quietist” approach favored in the paper, although this is more due to the Pyrrhonists’ pursuit of *ataraxia* than for their attitude towards moral truths; I think Porchat would have seen the link as going quite a bit deeper.²³ In a talk I recently heard Thomasson give, called “Metaethics and the Functions of Moral Language”, this point of view was developed further, with particular attention to how moral language actually develops from childhood to adulthood. To give an idea of the argument, I cannot do better than quote the abstract to this paper: “The traditional problems of metaethics begin from questions about moral facts, moral properties, moral obligations and requirements: Are there such things? If so, what sorts of things are they? In this paper I argue that we should hesitate before leaping into these traditional metaphysical questions—and take a step back to first ask questions about the functions of moral

²³ Warren and Thomasson 2023; the reference to Pyrrhonism is on p.526.

discourse, and how it enters language. For starting with questions about linguistic functions can show us that some of the later 'metaphysical' questions are misguided, arising from mistakes that come from failing to appreciate the diverse functions of various parts of language, and the diverse rules by which they enter language".²⁴ In his final paper in the collection (which was the last he wrote), "The notion of *phainomenon* in Sextus Empiricus" (2013), Porchat speaks of his and Sextus' skepticism as "a philosophy of language" (p.363). If one wanted to spell out the kind of thing he had in mind, I can hardly imagine a better illustration than this.

Thomasson, then, is a philosopher who seems to fit very well Porchat's contention that much contemporary philosophy is Pyrrhonian in spirit. And, as I noted, there are distinguished predecessors of her approach in twentieth-century philosophy, as she is well aware – even if Porchat might say that they did not appreciate the commonality between their philosophies and Pyrrhonian skepticism. However, while Thomasson is not unique – there are surely others today, too, who share her general approach – it must also be admitted that many philosophers today do not fit this model at all. Thomasson has built a career challenging many of the pretensions of metaphysics precisely because of the renewed popularity of metaphysics in recent decades. Some branches of contemporary metaphysics may be possible to accommodate under Porchat's conception of philosophy within a skeptical outlook; social metaphysics, which investigates the nature of social phenomena, such as money, corporations, or gender and race, is perhaps an example – or can be an example, if practiced in the spirit for which he advocates. But metaphysics carries the ever-present risk of attempting to achieve the God's-eye view; and some contemporary metaphysicians unapologetically embrace this. Theodore Sider, for example, wrote a book called *Writing the Book of the World*,²⁵ which argues as follows, to quote from his Preface: "The world has

²⁴ I thank Amie Thomasson for permission to quote the abstract of this (as yet unpublished) paper.

²⁵ Sider 2011.

a distinguished structure, a privileged description. For a representation to be fully successful, truth is not enough; the representation must also use the right concepts, so that its conceptual structure matches reality's structure. There is an objectively correct way to 'write the book of the world'" (vii). If one thinks one can write the book of the world, in this very ambitious sense, one will not be shy about saying that there are really no such things as tables and chairs. Porchat would have been horrified.²⁶

We cannot, of course, survey the whole spectrum of contemporary and recent philosophy. But in light of the few examples I have alluded to, I wonder whether Porchat may have been too optimistic in claiming that much contemporary philosophy proceeds in the spirit of the philosophy that, in the last few essays in the collection, he argues can be conducted within the Pyrrhonian skeptical framework. "Much", of course, is vague. But the impulse towards the God's-eye view has not disappeared; some apparently still think they can attain it, and others, while acknowledging its unavailability, see this as a matter for regret. Nonetheless, Porchat's final picture of what philosophy within the skeptical framework might look like seems to me both plausible and attractive; indeed, this seems to me the best of his various perspectives on skepticism, philosophy, and the relations between them, which have been a central focus of this paper. I hope this volume helps this conception of philosophy to gain more prominence.

IV

I close with a final historical comment. In at least two places, Porchat asserts that Pyrrhonian skepticism, in its original ancient version, did not have time to develop fully before "barbarism"

²⁶ Plínio Smith has told me that Porchat would not have been aware of the latest developments I discuss in this section. However, the denial that there are tables and chairs goes back at least several decades; see Van Inwagen 1990. And Porchat thought there would always be dogmatists among us to guard against, as he stresses at the close of "It is still necessary to be a sceptic" (p.264). According to Smith, a philosopher Porchat was well aware of and saw as a kindred spirit, from the analytic tradition but arguably no longer part of it in the later phase of his career, was Richard Rorty.

overtook the Roman empire, with disastrous consequences for intellectual life (pp.262, 278, but the point is also hinted at elsewhere). In one of these places (p.262), he also remarks that “Pyrrhonism lacked a thinker of the calibre of a Carneades; Sextus was certainly a lesser philosopher and was not able to explore the conceptual treasure he had at hand”. Had there been more time, he seems to imply, a greater Pyrrhonist might have come along and taken matters further. As it happened, however, the development of skepticism was cut short, and it took a long time before alternatives to dogmatic philosophy (including, eventually, Porchat’s own mature outlook) were able to re-emerge.

I have my doubts about this historical account. The “barbarism” to which Porchat refers is presumably the collapse of the western Roman empire. But that did not finally happen until 476 CE, long after any plausible dates for Sextus, though there was admittedly considerable and frequent unrest from the third century on; and the eastern Roman empire lasted almost another thousand years, though it too had many unstable periods. More importantly, this instability was not accompanied by a collapse in intellectual life. The Platonist movement of late antiquity, usually referred to as neo-Platonism, thrived throughout the demise of the western Roman empire and survived into the early Byzantine period; so did the tradition of Aristotelian commentary that partially overlapped with neo-Platonism. The founder of neo-Platonism, Plotinus, was active in middle of the third century – right around the time when the tradition of Pyrrhonian skepticism seems to have come to an end – and its latest representatives, Proclus, Simplicius and Damascius, were all alive after the collapse of the western empire, the last two surviving well into the sixth century. Proclus (412-485 CE) headed a neo-Platonic Academy in Athens, which regarded itself as the successor to Plato’s original Academy, and this institution survived until the eastern Roman emperor Justinian closed it down in 529. It is worth adding that neo-Platonism is among the most dogmatic of all philosophies; it posits multiple levels of reality above and beyond the familiar material world. Rather than skepticism falling victim to the collapse of a civilization, I think it is

more likely that it fell victim to the popularity of a very different philosophy. What happened soon after Sextus' time was not the death of Intellectual life, but its shift in a radically anti-skeptical direction – and the rise of Christianity was no doubt another contributing factor. The headwinds facing Sextus were, I suspect, even more powerful than those now facing us, supposing we wish to see a broadly Pyrrhonian outlook taken seriously.²⁷

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²⁷ I presented an earlier version of this paper to an audience at the University of São Paulo (together with online attendees from elsewhere in Latin America) in June 2024. I thank the participants for a very lively and helpful discussion. I especially thank Plínio Smith, who offered prepared comments on that occasion and also discussed Porchat’s philosophy with me, in writing and in conversation, both before and during my visit to São Paulo.

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