

## Outlines of Pyrrhonism Sextus Empiricus

*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is one of the classic works in philosophical skepticism, the belief that knowledge into the nature of reality (or, metaphysical truth) is unattainable. Skeptics oppose what they call 'dogmatism' in philosophy, which is illustrated by many of the ancient Greek philosophers (e.g., Plato and Aristotle) who claim that they have discovered philosophical truths about the world.

### On the Text

Sextus' text is based upon the teachings of Pyrrho of Ellis, a Greek philosopher who lived in about the 3rd century BCE. Pyrrho's philosophy can be summarized in the slogan, "No more this than that."<sup>1</sup> For any supposed truth of the philosophers of his time, he sought a counter-argument to illustrate its uncertainty. The great philosopher Plato, for example, sought a set of universal *eidos*—'forms' or 'essences'—of things which are common to all objects of a given type. Against such metaphysical speculation, Pyrrho claimed that all we can truly know is what is evident, immediately given to the senses at a given time. All else is unknowable.

Sextus' work was virtually unknown until the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when it was translated into Latin. It had a remarkable impact upon European thought after that, most famously through Miguel de Montaigne's *Apology for Raymond Sebond*. In addition, it is one of the primary philosophical motivations for the development of the thought of both Rene Descartes and David Hume, two philosophers whom we will study in this course.

### Outlines

Sextus' philosophy puts itself in opposition to two main types of philosophers, dogmatists and Academics. Academic skeptics are those who, following the philosophy of Plato, claim that they know only that they do not know. Their search for knowledge transcends the sensory world and is defined by a "search for inapprehendables," the metaphysical world of forms.<sup>2</sup> Dogmatists claim to have already discovered the truth of the world through rational argumentation. In opposition to both who have stopped their search for the truth, the skeptics never claim to arrive at a final truth, either positively or negatively. Rather, Sextus claims that "we do not make any positive assertion that anything we shall say is wholly as we affirm it to be. We merely report accurately on each thing as our impressions of it are at the moment."<sup>3</sup> That is, the only thing one can know is what one immediately perceives, and neither past experiences nor future predictions of experience is truly knowable.

Sextus defines skepticism as "an ability to place in antithesis, in any manner whatever, appearances and judgments, and thus—because of the equality of force in the objects and arguments opposed—to come first of all to a suspension of judgment and then to mental tranquility."<sup>4</sup> The ideal of the skeptic is the image of the scale. For any argument that can be placed on one side of the scale for the supposed truth of a claim *p*, an argument of equal potency for its negation (*not p*) can be placed on the opposite side. This is the true way to *ataraxia*: 'unperturbedness' or 'peace of mind.' There are three key ways that this opposition takes place:

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1 See chapter 18

2 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* tr. S. Ethridge and ed. P. Hallie (Hackett, 1985) p. 31. Hereafter OP.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

4 p. 32-3

1. by placing what things appear to be in opposition to other appearances,
2. by placing thoughts or judgments of how things seem to be in opposition to other thoughts or judgments, or
3. by placing the truth of appearances as opposed to thoughts or judgments.

By not searching for the truth, the skeptic reaches happiness by ignoring the search entirely, and thus skeptics are never bothered by the daunting and endless search for “truth”, if such a thing is even possible. For the skeptics, it is knowledge of one's own ignorance that leads to bliss. Sextus' argument for this is that philosophers have sought for years to attain truth and failed. There are many 'proofs' of the nature of things, many of which contradict themselves. It follows from this that there is no higher 'criteria' for truth, a set of conditions by which one can discern truth from falsity. However, skepticism should not be confused with apathy or nihilism. There is only one criteria that exists, and it is a “practical” one, a “standard of action the observance of which regulates our actions in life.” The Practical Criterion is fourfold, “ [1.] the guidance of nature, [2.] the compulsion of the feelings, [3.] the tradition of laws and customs and [4.] instruction in the arts.”<sup>5</sup> The truth of skepticism is that abstaining from the search for any truth outside the human realm is the path to true happiness (*eudaimoneia*).

### Ten Modes

There are ten modes of skepticism which form the basis of his argumentation. Each is a reason by which one should abstain from judgment on a given fact. They are divided into three categories, as an argument from the knower (1-4), argument from the thing known (7, 10), or both (5, 6, 8, 9).

1. variations of animals (pp. 45-54)
2. Differences in human beings (pp. 54-6)
3. differences in construction of the sense organs (pp. 56-9)
4. circumstances (pp. 59-63)
5. positions, distances, and places involved (pp. 63-4)
6. admixtures (pp. 64-5)
7. qualities and compoundings of the underlying objects (pp. 66-7)
8. relativity of things (pp. 67-8)
9. frequency/rarity of occurrence (pp. 68-9)
10. institutions, customs, laws, mythical beliefs and dogmatic notions (pp. 69-72)

### Five Agrippian Argument Forms

Sextus' also discusses some modes put forth by some “later skeptics,” which we know to be a reference to Agrippa. Although Sextus talks as these as roughly equivalent to the ten modes of Pyrrho, they can be seen as different since they are forms of arguments that can be employed. They are:

1. argument from disagreement
2. argument by infinite regress
3. argument from relativity (10 modes)
4. argument against assumption
5. argument by circularity

Sextus also puts forth another way to view the skeptical procedure in terms of two simple modes in Ch. 16. A thing is either known through itself or through another thing. A thing cannot be known through itself if it is subject to disagreement, since there is no criteria for evaluation of so.<sup>6</sup> If through another thing, then either it is circular or subject to an infinite regress.

Discussion Questions:

- ✓ Is the skeptic's claim to ignorance self-defeating? In other words, how can a skeptic be sure that that they do not know? Is Sextus vulnerable to this objection? Why or why not?
- ✓ How can skepticism claim to take appearances as true, without contradicting their own doctrine? Likewise, can a skeptic consistently claim that appearances are not true? Why or why not?
- ✓ Does skepticism remove grounds for action? Does skepticism collapse into a form of nihilism? Why or why not?
- ✓ Sextus repeatedly denies there is an objective criteria for truth. Is this true? Why or why not?

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6 cf. p. 49n7