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Introduction

I ANCIENT VERSUS MODERN SCEPTICISM

This volume focuses on scepticism as it was understood and practised in the ancient Greek and subsequently the ancient Greco-Roman world. The title of the volume is therefore less than ideal. "Ancient" should not in general be used as a shorthand for "ancient Greek" or "ancient Roman," as if the rest of the world did not exist. And there is a particular reason for unease in this case, seeing that a plausible case can be made for regarding some figures and movements in ancient Indian philosophy as sceptical. For this reason I originally proposed "Ancient Greek Scepticism" as the title. But it was correctly pointed out that some important figures to be discussed – most obviously Cicero – were definitely not Greek, and that it is by no means certain even that Sextus Empiricus, the one Pyrrhonist sceptic of whom we have substantial surviving writings, was Greek. My second proposal, "Greco-Roman Scepticism," was in turn subject to quite reasonable criticism on grounds of its unfamiliarity. So with some reluctance I had to agree that "Ancient Scepticism" was the best title available.

The sceptical philosophers and traditions to be discussed are, then, firmly located in the history of Western philosophy. And it is of course also true that scepticism has been a topic of central importance in modern Western philosophy at least since Descartes, and continues to excite widespread interest today. But "scepticism" means rather different things in the two periods.

Nowadays, scepticism is largely understood as a position in epistemology, consisting in a denial of the possibility of knowledge – or, on more stringent versions, even reasonable belief – in some domain.

There are positions referred to as moral scepticism that are not epistemological in character; most famously, John Mackie referred to the claim with which he began his book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*,[1] "There are no objective values," as a form of scepticism. But this is something of an anomaly, and in general when one speaks of scepticism in philosophy, it is understood that an epistemological thesis is meant. Scepticism in the ancient period was not like this; it was not restricted to epistemology – or, for that matter, to any one area of philosophy – and, just as important, it was not a thesis. Scepticism, rather, was a certain kind of intellectual *posture* – specifically, a posture of suspension of judgement. And there was in principle no restriction on the subject matter to which this suspension of judgement could be applied. Sextus Empiricus, for example, covers the main topics in all of the three standardly recognized areas of philosophy, logic (which included what we call epistemology, but also what we call logic), physics, and ethics, and also the specialized sciences grammar, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astrology, and music. Broadly speaking, the procedure throughout is to induce suspension of judgement about the truth of the various competing theories or views on the topic in question. Since what is generally at issue is the adequacy of the reasons in favor of any given theory, epistemological questions, such as that of the justifiability of beliefs, are at least in the background most of the time, and often in the foreground. But except when epistemology actually is the area under discussion, the primary focus is not on, say, the general question what it takes for a belief to be justified, or to amount to knowledge; rather, it is on the process of subverting the reader's confidence in some particular theory on some particular (frequently non-epistemological) topic, leading to suspension of judgement about its correctness.

There is also, regardless of the topic under discussion at any given time, a broadly *ethical* aspect – that is, a practical aspect – to scepticism in the ancient period. Scepticism was something not just to be talked about, but to be lived. Nowadays, it is rare for philosophers to identify themselves as sceptics; scepticism is typically regarded as a *threat* to be warded off, not as an outlook to be embraced. And even aside from that point, scepticism is typically regarded as an issue of purely theoretical import; the question whether one could or should "live" one's scepticism does not even arise. This is true even of Mackie's moral scepticism, which one might think would make a practical

difference; while he understands his scepticism to indicate that morality has to be made rather than discovered, he regards this purely as an insight concerning how to *conceive* of the activity of deciding what one ought to do, not as something that might actually affect what one decided. But ancient scepticism was something to be put into practice; a sceptic was someone who suspended judgement, and this attitude of suspension of judgement was something one held on to not merely when engaged in theoretical discussion, but also when engaged in the activities of everyday life. This is why the sceptics were regularly faced with what was called the *apraxia* or "inactivity" objection, that is, the objection that it is impossible actually to put into practice a policy of across-the-board suspension of judgement; the point is that the sceptics claimed to do precisely that. One sceptical tradition, the Pyrrhonist tradition, even claimed profound practical benefits from the sceptical life; the sceptic achieves *ataraxia*, "freedom from worry" – a goal that others are assumed to be seeking as well, but to be thwarted in achieving because of their failure to suspend judgement.

II THE MAIN CHARACTERS

I have already referred to the Pyrrhonists. They are the ones who, at least in the later stages, actually called themselves *skeptikoi*, "inquirers." As Sextus explains in the opening sentences of his best-known work *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (standardly abbreviated to *PH*, the initials of the Greek title in transliteration), this is to distinguish them from people who think they have discovered the truth, and also from people who have come to the definite conclusion that the truth is undiscoverable; the sceptic, as he presents it, is the one who has not closed off any options, but is still looking. It is an interesting question how this "inquiry" is to be connected with the procedure already mentioned, that of inducing suspension of judgement, with *ataraxia* as the result. But in Sextus' official introductory characterization of scepticism (*PH* 1.8), it is the process of inducing suspension of judgement (together with the further effect of *ataraxia*) that is emphasized, not "inquiry" in any normal sense of the term. And it is by virtue of the centrality of suspension of judgement in Sextus' account of scepticism that the term is commonly applied not just to the Pyrrhonists, but also to the members of the Academy, the school founded by Plato, for a considerable period of its history. The Academic sceptics did not

use this term of themselves, but they too engaged in forms of argument the intended effect of which was suspension of judgement.

In a little more detail, but still in bare outline, the history of scepticism in the ancient Greek and Greco-Roman world is as follows. The figure usually recognized as the first sceptic is Pyrrho of Elis (c.360–270 BCE). The evidence on Pyrrho is scarce and difficult to interpret; so it is a matter of considerable debate to what extent Pyrrho actually did anticipate the sceptical outlook adopted by those who later called themselves Pyrrhonists. But since he was claimed, on whatever basis, as an inspiration or founding father by these later thinkers, it is natural to accord him a place in the sceptical canon. It is also likely that Pyrrho himself drew inspiration from earlier thinkers – Greek thinkers and perhaps also, if one is to believe a tantalizing and undeveloped remark in Diogenes Laertius (9.61), Indian thinkers whom he encountered on his travels with Alexander's expedition. But at least in the case of the Greek tradition, while we may well see elements in the philosophies of the earlier period that seem to anticipate the thought of Pyrrho, or of other later sceptics, these are best regarded precisely as sceptical *elements*, rather than as adding up to a full-fledged sceptical philosophy, as that term was later understood.

The adoption of Pyrrho as a figurehead did not happen for some time. He had a few immediate followers, and an enthusiastic publicist in his follower Timon of Phlius, who wrote numerous books of which only fragments survive, but was then apparently forgotten for some two centuries. In the interim came the sceptical phase of the Academy. The first Academic to take the school in a sceptical direction was Arcesilaus of Pitane (316/5–241/0 BCE). It has been suggested that Pyrrho was in some way an influence on Arcesilaus, and this is possible (though neither he nor anyone else in the Academy is known to have acknowledged it). But Arcesilaus did claim to have learned from Socrates (Cicero, *Acad.* 1.45); and certainly Socrates' argumentative practice in many of Plato's dialogues could well have served as a model for someone in the business of constructing sets of opposing arguments, with a view to suspension of judgement. In any case, this became the characteristic philosophical activity of the Academics for roughly two centuries; the other important sceptical Academic was Carneades of Cyrene (214–129/8 BCE).

By the early first century BCE, however, the scepticism of the Academy seems to have gone soft. The last head of the Academy

with any claim to be called sceptical was Philo of Larissa (159/8–84/3 BCE). But instead of maintaining a rigorous suspension of judgement, Philo clearly allows the holding of views; the only requirement is that one hold them tentatively, recognizing that certainty is not to be had and that these views may at some point need to be replaced with others. Philo's Academic contemporary Antiochus abandoned scepticism altogether, setting up a rival Academy which he claimed to represent the genuine Academic philosophy, the philosophy of Plato, on which, he claimed, both Aristotle and the Stoics agreed in all essentials. After these two the Academy ceased to exist as an organized school, although a few later thinkers, notably Favorinus of Arles (c.85–165 CE), claimed to be continuing the spirit of Academic scepticism. But out of the ruins of the Academy, so to speak, came a new sceptical movement setting itself against the Academy and identifying itself with Pyrrho.

The leader of this new movement was Aenesidemus of Cnossos (dates uncertain, but apparently active in the early first century BCE). It looks as if he was himself at first a member of the Academy; but he is reported as denouncing the Academics, and especially those of his own day, for being much too willing to make definite assertions about how things are. Claiming instead to do philosophy along the lines of Pyrrho (though it is not clear at what level of specificity he meant this), Aenesidemus boasted of eschewing definite assertions. The interpretation of this, too, is a matter of considerable dispute – as with Pyrrho himself, we are dependent on very incomplete and not always reliable evidence – but it seems clear that Aenesidemus takes himself to be making a renewed commitment to some form of suspension of judgement, which he detects in the thought of Pyrrho, but finds missing in the thought of at least the Academics who were his rough contemporaries, Philo and Antiochus. It is also clear that for Aenesidemus, following Pyrrho, scepticism has the benefit of bringing *ataraxia*; this had never been a component of Academic scepticism.

The Pyrrhonist tradition initiated by Aenesidemus is what eventually leads to the voluminous surviving writings of Sextus Empiricus (probably second century CE). (I use the terms "tradition" or "movement" because there is no good reason to believe that Pyrrhonism was ever a formal "school," in the sense that the term is used of the Stoics or Epicureans.) We know the names of a few other Pyrrhonists, but to us they are really no more than names. Just as

there is serious dispute about the philosophy of Aenesidemus, there is also dispute about whether or how Pyrrhonism developed in the significant time between Aenesidemus and Sextus. The interpretation of Sextus' own philosophy is itself by no means free from controversy. But in his case, uniquely among the sceptics of the ancient Greek and Greco-Roman periods, we can read what he has to say for ourselves. Diogenes Laertius (9.116) names one pupil of Sextus, Saturninus, but he too is no more than a name to us. And at that point, as far as we can tell, an active, continuous Pyrrhonist movement comes to an end. Sextus' writings did not apparently excite much interest in late antiquity – still less so in the medieval period. But the Renaissance saw a revival of interest in them, together with the Academic writings of Cicero (who studied as a youth with Philo and Antiochus). And this renewed interest had much to do with the resurgence of scepticism as an issue in early modern philosophy – despite the notable differences, alluded to earlier, between scepticism as understood since Descartes and scepticism in the ancient period.

The surviving writings of Sextus Empiricus have a peculiar nomenclature; given his importance in this volume, some clarification of this is worthwhile at the outset.[2] His best-known work, as already noted, is *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*PH*), in three books: the first is a general account of Pyrrhonism, while the second and third address the three standard areas of philosophy, logic, physics, and ethics (logic in book 2, physics and ethics in book 3). Covering roughly the same ground as *PH* 2 and 3, but at much greater length, are two books *Against the Logicians*, two books *Against the Physicists*, and one book *Against the Ethicists*. At least, these are the titles generally given to these books today. But it is clear that these five books all belong to a single, large-scale work; and Sextus himself appears to refer to this work in several places by the title *Skeptika Humpomnêmata*, *Sceptical Treatises*. It is also clear that this work in its original form was even larger than the portion we now have. The first sentence of *Against the Logicians* refers back to a just-completed general treatment of scepticism – in other words, to something corresponding to *PH* 1. This was long thought to be a reference back to *PH*. But this cannot be right, since *PH* as a whole is not a general treatment of scepticism; the reference must therefore be to a lost book or books.[3] There are indications (subtle, but relatively cogent) that this lost general treatment actually consisted of *five* books.[4] If so,

unless these were very short books, *Sceptical Treatises* was a work of truly gigantic proportions.

Whatever its size, *Sceptical Treatises* is not the title by which this work is generally known today; and the confusion caused by the loss of the general book or books may have been part of the reason for this. In addition to the works so far mentioned, there is a third work that survives complete in six books. This is the work that scrutinizes the six specialized sciences mentioned earlier, and it is called (probably by Sextus himself) *Pros Mathêmatikous* (or *Adversus Mathematicos* in its Latin rendering), *Against the Professors* (standardly abbreviated to *M*). Despite the fact that the closing of the sixth and final book makes quite clear that it marks the conclusion of the entire work, at some point the five surviving books of *Sceptical Treatises* came to be viewed as a continuation of this work; as a result, *Against the Logicians* came to be referred to as *M* 7–8, *Against the Physicists* as *M* 9–10, and *Against the Ethicists* as *M* 11. This is thoroughly misleading, but the convention is deeply entrenched. I have myself been criticized for perpetuating it,[5] but to expect a wholesale change at this point is not realistic.

III ABOUT THIS BOOK

The bare-bones sketch in the previous section may have raised many questions. The essays in this volume fill out the story, and in the course of doing so, offer avenues for answering these questions. We begin with six essays detailing the origins and development of the two sceptical traditions. Mi-Kyoung Lee examines possible antecedents to scepticism in the period prior to Pyrrho. Svavar Svavarsson analyzes the evidence relating to Pyrrho himself and his immediate followers, especially Timon. Harald Thorsrud discusses the two leading Academic sceptics, Arcesilaus and Carneades. Carlos Lévy traces the later history, demise, and aftermath of the Academic sceptical tradition. R. J. Hankinson deals with the rise of the later Pyrrhonist tradition in the person of Aenesidemus. And Pierre Pellegrin focuses on the thought of Sextus Empiricus, who for us represents the culmination of the Pyrrhonist tradition, and indeed of Greek or Greco-Roman scepticism as a whole.

Next come seven essays on somewhat more specific topics, many of which have been major bones of contention in recent scholarship. The first three of these address issues concerning what might be

called the practice or the implementation of scepticism. Casey Perin considers what kinds of belief, if any, are open to a sceptic. Katja Vogt investigates whether, or how, a sceptic can allow for choice and action of a recognizably human kind. And I look at the ways in which scepticism might or might not be compatible with an ethical outlook. All three of these essays at least touch on both the Academics and the Pyrrhonists, but the Pyrrhonists, and especially Sextus Empiricus, get the majority of the attention, if only because of the state of our evidence. The next essay, by Gisela Striker, takes up directly a theme that is at least partly in view in the three just mentioned, and in a few others as well: the comparison between the Academic and Pyrrhonist varieties of scepticism. The following three essays address topics specific to the Pyrrhonist tradition: the various sets of Modes, or standardized forms of sceptical argumentation, devised by members of the Pyrrhonist tradition (Paul Woodruff); the links between Pyrrhonism and the medical theory of the time (James Allen); and Sextus' treatment of the specialized sciences (as opposed to philosophical topics) in *Against the Professors* (Emidio Spinelli).

The volume ends with two essays about the response to these sceptical traditions beyond antiquity. Luciano Floridi surveys how far they were even noticed, and if so, how they were regarded in the thousand years or more between the end of antiquity and the Renaissance and early modern periods, ending with Descartes. Finally, in a more purely philosophical spirit, Michael Williams compares and contrasts scepticism as understood in Descartes and scepticism in the ancient period – especially Pyrrhonist scepticism, but also Academic scepticism, at least as represented by Cicero. It would, of course, have been possible to continue the story beyond Descartes. Numerous other modern philosophers either have interesting (if sometimes misguided) views about the ancient sceptics, or else admit of interesting comparisons between their own philosophies and one or another variety of ancient scepticism; Hume and Nietzsche are prominent representatives of both categories. But this volume is primarily about the ancient period, and one has to stop somewhere.

As this brief overview has no doubt suggested, there is some overlap in the topics and figures considered in the various essays. This is deliberate; it seemed desirable to have a variety of perspectives on the same material. Sometimes two essays, although addressing some common topic in the context of their own different main themes,

will agree in their conclusions; at other times they will disagree. These points of correspondence are sometimes marked by explicit cross-references among the essays; cross-references also occur in places where one essay just mentions or deals very briefly with some issue addressed at greater length in another essay. The cross-references are, however, selective; given the degree of interconnection among the questions considered in the volume, it would have been easy for them to become tedious and overdone.

More generally, I have sought out a group of authors who, besides being acknowledged experts, could be expected to offer a variety of opinions about the subject. (One consideration here, though by no means the only one, is that a variety of nationalities is represented.) As in most vigorous scholarly fields, there is much disagreement even about central matters of interpretation, and the present volume reflects this. The result is a little disconcerting at times for the editor, whose own previously expressed opinions on some of these matters come in for considerable criticism in several of the essays to follow. Still, this is as it should be; the purpose of the volume is to introduce the sceptics themselves, but also to give a representative impression of the range of ways they are understood in current scholarship. One might say that this is especially suitable to the subject of ancient scepticism, centered as it is around suspension of judgement among opposing alternatives. But scepticism is, of course, by no means alone in being a subject of scholarly contention. And I do not mean to suggest that the volume's goal is to induce suspension of judgement in the reader about alternative possible interpretations. What is intended is rather that the reader get some sense of the existence of such alternatives.

The thinkers and topics considered in this volume have been a flourishing field of study for some decades. But this was not always so, at least in the English-speaking world. It was not until around the late 1970s that Hellenistic philosophy in general, and the Greek sceptical traditions in particular, came to receive serious and widespread philosophical scrutiny. Since then a great deal has been written, and a good proportion of this scholarly activity is represented in the bibliography (with a certain bias, given the likely readership of this volume, towards work written in English). But there has not, until now, been an accessible volume of essays designed to give a comprehensive picture of the field as it stands today. I hope that this volume succeeds in filling that gap.

NOTES

1 Mackie [434].
2 This is further discussed by Pierre Pellegrin, Chapter 6 "Sextus Empiricus."
3 This was first argued in Janáček [33].
4 See Blomqvist [37].
5 In Machuca [43].