

Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-47107-7 — How to Be a Pyrrhonist
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PART I

How the Pyrrhonists Present Themselves

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CHAPTER I

The Pyrrhonist's Dilemma
What to Write If You Have Nothing to Say

“All human beings by nature desire to know,” says Aristotle at the opening of his *Metaphysics* (980a21). One might find various reasons to take issue with that claim. On the most everyday level, one might point to the seemingly willful blindness to reality of large sections of the voting population, in some countries at least. Or, on a more theoretical level, one might hold views to the effect that human beings systematically conceal from themselves certain important truths that would be too uncomfortable to hold consistently in view; ideas of this kind may be found, for example, in Nietzsche, Freud or Sartre.

How would the Pyrrhonian skeptics react to Aristotle's claim? They would certainly question the assumption that the desire for knowledge is built into human nature – just as they would question any other claim about the nature of things. But I think there is evidence that some Pyrrhonists went much further than this. Aenesidemus, who seems to have started a self-consciously Pyrrhonian movement or tradition in the first century BC, is reported describing the Pyrrhonist as happy precisely because he does *not* think he knows anything, by contrast with other philosophers who are tormented by the fruitless search for knowledge (Photius, *Bibl.* 169b21–30). And Pyrrho himself, the much earlier figure from whom Aenesidemus claims to draw inspiration, is represented by his follower Timon as not troubling himself with questions about the nature of the world around us – with this lack of concern being one source of his amazingly tranquil demeanor (DL 9.64–5, Aristocles in Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.18.19). Now, what of Sextus Empiricus, the one Pyrrhonist of whom we have substantial surviving writings? Has he too given up on any attempt to discover the truth, and if so, does he too consider this condition preferable to that of those philosophers who retain this desire? I shall argue that the answer is predominantly “yes,” although the matter is not entirely straightforward.

This then leads to another question, which will be my central concern. To the extent that Sextus has indeed given up on the search for truth, what is his purpose in writing what are clearly, in some sense, philosophical works, and what strategies of writing does he employ given that purpose? Of course, some skeptically inclined philosophers preferred not to write anything; the Academics Arcesilaus and Carneades, as well as Pyrrho, are obvious examples – and some might also include Socrates on this list. But a skeptic who does write had better be careful not to seem like a philosopher of the usual stripe. The question is what that requires him to avoid, and what else it encourages him to develop, and this is what I want to consider for the case of Sextus. First, though, we need to discuss the philosophical stance that Sextus adopts, such that he faces these constraints on his manner of writing. From now on I shall use the terms “skeptical” and “Pyrrhonist” interchangeably, referring, unless otherwise specified, to Sextus’ understanding of those terms.

I

Sextus tells us in the first book of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* that the skeptics are people who started out with the goal of discovering the truth (*PH* 1.12, 26). Presumably, both in Sextus’ opinion and in fact, this is a goal shared by most other people of a theoretical bent. In the proto-skeptics’ case, admittedly, it is not a goal held purely for its own sake; rather, the discovery of the truth is thought of as a means to the attainment of *ataraxia*, tranquility. It is *ataraxia* that is given as the skeptics’ *telos* or aim in life, or at least, *ataraxia* as regards matters of opinion – that is to say, matters that would be addressed in the course of the kinds of investigations that were initially hoped to lead to the truth about things (*PH* 1.25–30). Sextus may well also have believed (not without some warrant) that this goal, too, was much more widely shared; certainly his accounts of how and why the skeptic is better off than non-skeptical philosophers (*PH* 1.25–30, 3.235–238, *M* 11.110–167) appeal to the skeptic’s tranquility by contrast with the extreme anxiety of the others, as if it is common ground that tranquility is what it makes most sense ultimately to aim for. In any case, according to him, it is both the aim the skeptics started out with and the aim that, as fully fledged skeptics, they still retain. What is crucial, though, is that the route by which they actually achieve *ataraxia* is quite different from the one by which they originally expected to achieve it.

Instead of discovering the truth, according to Sextus, the skeptic “fell into disagreement of equal strength” (*enepesen eis tēn isosthenē diaphōnian*,

PH 1.26) – that is, fell into a position of being confronted by conflicting theories and impressions each of which struck him as equally persuasive. The “lack of uniformity” (*anômalia*, *PH* 1.12) in the theories and/or impressions on any given topic is stressed as the impetus behind the original search for the truth. But although the initial hope was that one would be able to sift through these conflicting data and determine which theories or impressions were the true ones, the outcome is that one is simply stuck with the conflict. The Greek verb translated “fell into” (*enepesen*), here as often, denotes an involuntary outcome, and the implication is very often that this outcome is unwelcome. But while this is how it may seem at first, in the present case there is an unexpected bonus. Faced with these conflicting theories “of equal strength,” one cannot but suspend judgment as to the truth of any of them. And this suspension of judgment, in turn, leads to precisely the tranquility that one was seeking in the first place (*PH* 1.26). This result is described as occurring *tuchikôs* (*PH* 1.26, cf. 29), frequently translated “by chance,”¹ also “fortuitously.”² Clearly part of the point is that this result is again something not under our control, and that, on its first occurrence at least, it could not have been foreseen; there is also a suggestion that this was a fortunate turn of events, making “fortuitously” perhaps preferable. But what *tuchikôs* is *not* intended to suggest – and here both the usual English translations are less than perfect – is that this result is simply a once-off occurrence that is not reproducible; that this is not the idea is clear from Sextus’ analogy for the relationship between tranquility and the suspension of judgment that precedes it – “as a shadow follows a body” (*PH* 1.29). And it is also clear from the settled skeptical procedure that Sextus describes in the opening sections of *PH* Book 1.

This procedure is summed up in the following often-quoted sentence: “The skeptical ability is one that produces oppositions among things that appear and things that are thought in any way whatsoever, one from which, because of the equal strength in the opposing objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment, and after that to tranquility” (*PH* 1.8).³ Here it is clear that tranquility regularly and predictably follows suspension of judgment; the skeptic is someone who has developed a technique for reliably generating suspension of judgment, and thereby reliably producing tranquility. This text does not actually say that tranquility is the aim of the whole process. But, as we saw, tranquility is later

¹ So translated in Bury 1933; Hallie 1985; and Mates 1996.

² See Annas and Barnes 1994; also “fortuitement” in Pellegrin 1997.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

identified as the skeptic's *telos*; and besides, another passage does include *ataraxia* within the characterization of the purpose of the intellectual activities in which the skeptic engages. Responding to the question whether the skeptic “reasons about nature” or “discusses physics” (*phusio-logoi*), Sextus says that the skeptics do not do so in order to make definite assertions about how things are, but that they do so “for the sake of opposing to every argument an equal argument and for the sake of tranquility” (*PH* 1.18). He adds that they approach “the logical and the ethical parts of what is called philosophy” in the same way – logic, physics, and ethics being understood as the three standard parts of philosophy in the post-Aristotelian period. Sextus’ refusal to employ the term “philosophy” in his own voice may be due to the assumption that self-described philosophers generally take themselves to know at least some of the answers to their questions.⁴ More radically – to return to the point with which I began – it may be due to the fact that the term *philosophia*, “love of wisdom,” itself is not one with which a skeptic would wish to identify. It is not the desire for wisdom that motivates the skeptic – whether or not this might be thought to lead to tranquility – but the desire to create an intellectual equipoise (and thereby to produce tranquility). As we shall see, Sextus does not uniformly decline to adopt the term “philosophy” to describe his own activity, and there may be a point to this vacillation. Be that as it may, the present passage makes clear that the skeptic discusses all the same topics as those who do claim to practice philosophy; the difference is in the purpose or attitude with which these topics are approached.

I have spoken so far as if Sextus consistently and single-mindedly seeks to promote suspension of judgment, and thereby tranquility. But this is not so. The term *skeptikos* means “inquirer,” and Sextus begins *PH* by

⁴ That Sextus, with his use of the phrase “what is called philosophy,” is here both questioning the pretensions of those who use the term “philosophy” of their own activities, and declining to adopt the term himself, seems clear from his use of the qualifiers *legomenos* and *kaloumenos* (“said to be” or “called”) in other places. He commonly applies them to pieces of dogmatic terminology, and the effect is both to challenge the dogmatists’ claim to deliver on the theories that would legitimize this terminology and to distance himself from its use. See, for example, “the so-called non-rational animals” in the first of the Ten Modes in *PH* 1 (61, 62, 74, 76). Calling these animals “non-rational” (*aloga*) requires that one has a clear and defensible distinction between the rational and the non-rational; Sextus doubts that the dogmatists have this, and he would not attempt such a distinction himself, and the term “so-called” (*kaloumena*) draws attention to both points. The same is true of numerous theoretical concepts in logic or physics; see, e.g., *PH* 1.60, 2.95, 163, 166–7, 215, 3.30, 42, 54, 62, 102, 249, 270–2, *M* 7.225, 8.12, 109, 10.2, 220, 261, 11.180, 243, 1.179, 6.47, 51. In the passage at issue in the main text – and in others, as we shall see – he is making the same distancing move concerning the term “philosophy” itself; we will also see him doing the same with terms for the standard parts of philosophy. For more on Sextus’ attitude toward philosophy, see Chapter 2 in this book, especially Section IV.

saying that the skeptic is still investigating, that is, still trying to discover the truth – by contrast with two other groups, those who think they have discovered the truth and those who have decided that it cannot be discovered (1.1–4). Now clearly this attitude is incompatible with the one we were just describing. If one has decided that suspension of judgment is the surest route to tranquility, and therefore concentrates on producing and maintaining suspension of judgment, one is no longer trying to discover the truth. The skeptic may have started out trying to discover the truth, thinking that tranquility was to be attained this way; but once he finds that tranquility is in fact achieved after the search for truth fails and suspension of judgment ensues instead, the project of inquiry seems to be replaced by a project of developing an expertise in the production of equally powerful opposing arguments.

Against this, Casey Perin has argued that Sextus' description of the skeptic's "ability" at producing oppositions (*PH* 1.8) is compatible with his still being engaged in the additional enterprise of seeking the truth.⁵ But while it is true that there is strictly speaking no inconsistency here, it is also true that this passage – which seems designed to capture in one sentence the core of what skepticism consists in – contains no hint of any continuing search for truth; besides, the passage on the spirit in which the skeptic engages in physics (and logic and ethics, *PH* 1.18) is clearly *not* compatible with any such search. Perin acknowledges this last point⁶ and regards the passage on physics as an anomaly; more generally, he concedes that there is no single consistent account that will cover everything Sextus says. To me, however, the central passage on the skeptic's "ability" seems to belong much more naturally with the passage about the skeptic's engagement with physics, with the notion of the skeptic as a genuine inquirer as the anomalous element. Indeed, Sextus regularly describes his own activity as that of producing suspension of judgment by the systematic juxtaposition of opposing considerations. This is how he introduces the Modes (*PH* 1.31–4, 36), which offer a set of ready-made techniques for generating suspension of judgment. In the opening pages of *PH* he also says that "the principle (*archê*) of the skeptical fellowship is above all there being an equal argument opposed to every argument" (*PH* 1.12); this has nothing to do with the search for truth, everything to do with the preconditions for suspension of judgment. Similar remarks can be found in the longer work,

⁵ Perin 2010a, especially chapter 1; also Perin 2006. Another account that takes the notion of the skeptic as an "inquirer" seriously and at face value is Vogt 2012a, chapter 5.

⁶ Perin 2010a, 118, n. 6.

the surviving portions of which – *Against the Logicians*, *Against the Physicists*, and *Against the Ethicists* – cover roughly the same ground as *PH* 2 and 3 (*M* 7.443, 8.159–60).⁷

Being an inquirer is undeniably part of the skeptics' self-image, built into the term "skeptical" itself. Although "suspensive" (*ephektikē*) is another of the various terms for the Pyrrhonist outlook (*PH* 1.7), and Sextus occasionally calls himself and his colleagues "suspenders of judgment" (*PH* 2.10, *M* 11.152, cf. *PH* 1.209, 2.9) – also, somewhat more frequently, "bringers of impasse" (*aporêtikoi*), which seems (at least in Sextus' writings) to amount to more or less the same thing – "skeptical" is overwhelmingly the more common term in his works. But inquiry, in any normal sense of the term, has no role in his more detailed descriptions of what skepticism is and does. Nor does it seem to be what he is actually doing in the works themselves, where suspension of judgment is routinely the outcome, and the search for the truth does not seem to figure as any part of the enterprise. And so I am unconvinced by Perin's attempt to place inquiry at the center of what the skeptic is up to, and incline to agree with the numerous other scholars who have found the notion of inquiry somewhat unhelpful in understanding Sextus' brand of skepticism.⁸ If "inquiry" simply means not having decided that one knows the truth or that the truth is unknowable, then the skeptic, as Sextus characterizes him, is indeed an inquirer. But the claim that the skeptic "is still investigating," which is how Sextus introduces the notion of the skeptic as an inquirer, sounds as if it promises more than this; and that is the promise on which the rest of his work does not deliver.

II

Now, if this is how we should understand Sextus' skepticism, what is his purpose in writing? Although there are some notable exceptions, such as Plato, philosophers generally write with a view to leading the reader most effectively toward whatever conclusions they consider justified. But Sextus is not trying to promote any conclusions; rather, he is engaged in a certain kind of activity, the generating or maintaining of suspension of judgment. How does his writing contribute to this? In the first instance, we should presumably consider it an aspect, or an illustration, of that very activity.

⁷ On the fact that the longer work in its surviving form is incomplete, having lost a general portion corresponding to *PH* 1, see Janáček 1963.

⁸ See, e.g., Palmer 2000; Striker 2001; Grgic 2006; Marchand 2010.

With the partial exception of *PH* 1, which is a general description of what skepticism is, the works exhibit on a grand scale the production of opposing positions on the same topics. Sextus frequently tells us that suspension of judgment is the outcome, and this is just what we would expect from his characterization of the skeptic's "ability" in *PH* 1.8. The works, then, are part of Sextus' own practice as a skeptic. But there must be more to them than this. These are not private diaries or workbooks; Sextus is clearly also writing for others to read. Nor do they have the form of Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* or some of the writings of Seneca, which, whether or not they were written for others to read,⁹ are presented as exercises of inner reflection with a view to self-improvement – the sort of works that are most favorable to Pierre Hadot's conception of ancient philosophy as centered around the care of the soul.¹⁰ Although Sextus tells us that the goal of the whole enterprise is tranquility, and although he also speaks of skeptical utterances as reports of the speaker's feelings (*PH* 1.187) or of how things strike one at the time (*PH* 1.4), his writings are actually remarkably lacking in any introspective quality. (This is just one aspect of his extraordinary elusiveness; we really know almost nothing about him either as a historical figure or as a personality.) He does not come across as someone engaged in any kind of personal quest, but as someone imparting a message to his readers. This is most obvious from the first book of *PH*; there is no point in writing a general introduction to the nature of Pyrrhonism unless one wants outsiders to read it. But the tone of instruction, of the dissemination of a message to readers, is present throughout his work.

What message, and what readers? Sextus never tells us explicitly why or for whom he is writing. But there are three obvious, and not mutually exclusive, possibilities. One is that he is defending skepticism against attacks on it from other philosophers, showing that it is not, as they allege, inconsistent or impossible to put into practice in real life. In a few places Sextus is quite explicit that this is what he is doing. In the opening pages of *PH* he says, "Those who say that the skeptics do away with the appearances seem to me not to be listening to what we say" (*PH* 1.19), and then explains the place of appearances in skepticism. At the opening of Book 2 of the same work he addresses an objection to the effect that skeptics are

⁹ I do not think anyone would deny that Seneca intended his work to be read by others. The consensus today, however, seems to be that Marcus Aurelius' work was a set of purely personal notes that has survived accidentally; see, e.g., Sellars 2010; Gill 2013, xv; Van Ackeren 2013, n. 15. However, this particular issue makes no difference for my claim here about Sextus – that his work looks nothing like a "spiritual exercise."

¹⁰ See, e.g., Hadot 1995; parts of this originally appeared as Hadot 1987.

not in a position to investigate or discuss the theories put forward by non-skeptical philosophers (*PH* 2.1–11). And at the end of the long discussion in *Against the Ethicists* of why skeptics are better off, in terms of tranquility, than any other philosophers, he mentions and responds to the objections of “those who think that he [the skeptic] is reduced to inactivity or to inconsistency” (*M* 11.162–6). But it is also possible to understand the works much more generally as an exhibition of the viability of the skeptical outlook directed against those who would deny it.

However, while Sextus is clearly no stranger to polemic, there is also an expository character to his works, which suggests that he is not writing merely to defend skepticism against criticism. Again, this is most obvious in Book 1 of *PH*, which seems to be designed primarily to explain the character of skepticism to those previously unacquainted with it, not to rebut the objections of those who know about it but do not like it. But the same tone of explanation to outsiders can be detected in other places as well. For example, the discussion at the beginning of *Against the Logicians* of the various parts of philosophy, and of the appropriate order in which to treat them (*M* 7.2–24, also recalled at the beginning of *Against the Physicists*, *M* 9.1) looks as if it is designed to orient a reader unfamiliar with this material. More generally, his consistent practice of referring to the dogmatists in the third person, explaining what they say, suggests, at least rhetorically, that he intends to be addressing readers who would not identify themselves as dogmatists. Nor, for that matter, as skeptics, since he sometimes refers to the skeptics too in the third person; for example, “This is what the dogmatists’ opposition is like; and the skeptics’ way of meeting it is brief” (*M* 8.470).

If we agree to suppose that Sextus is writing in part for interested outsiders, it is a fair assumption that one purpose of this is to recommend skepticism to these readers, and perhaps to convert them into skeptics themselves. The closing sections of *PH* (3.280–1) speak of the skeptics as “philanthropic.” Sextus actually says that they want to cure the *dogmatists* of their rashness, substituting suspension of judgment for the definite views these dogmatists used to hold (and so inducing tranquility in them, though Sextus does not mention that here). The passage has no parallel, and it is a little hard to take this seriously as his settled purpose – why should he care whether or not the dogmatists are “cured”? But the passage does open up the theme of a therapeutic purpose for the writings, and there is no reason why those who begin reading them neither as dogmatists nor as skeptics should not be among those Sextus would be happy to bring over to the skeptics’ side.