HOW TO BE A PYRRHONIST

What was it like to be a practitioner of Pyrrhonist skepticism? This important volume brings together for the first time a selection of Richard Bett's essays on ancient Pyrrhonism, allowing readers a better understanding of the key aspects of this school of thought. The volume examines Pyrrhonism's manner of self-presentation, including its methods of writing, its desire to show how special it is, and its use of humor; it considers Pyrrhonism's argumentative procedures regarding specific topics, such as signs, space, or the Modes; and it explores what it meant in practice to live as a Pyrrhonist, including the kind of ethical outlook which Pyrrhonism might allow and, in general, the character of a skeptical life – and how far these might strike us as feasible or desirable. It also shows how Pyrrhonism often raises questions that matter to us today, both in our everyday lives and in our philosophical reflection.

RICHARD BETT is Professor and Chair of Philosophy at the Johns Hopkins University. His translations of works by Sextus Empiricus include *Against the Logicians* (Cambridge, 2005) and *Against the Physicists* (Cambridge, 2012), and he is also the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism* (Cambridge, 2010).

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The Practice and Significance of Pyrrhonian Skepticism

RICHARD BETT

The Johns Hopkins University

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Preface

Like many scholars whose careers are at a relatively advanced stage, I have published quite a few essays in scattered locations. Many of these came from invitations to participate in conferences and were published in volumes that resulted from those conferences, volumes that are often obscure and not widely available. In addition, a few of them have previously been available only in a language other than English.

While I have written on a variety of philosophers and schools of philosophy, the fact is that it is ancient Greek skepticism with which I am principally associated in the scholarly world, and this is no accident; all of my book-length publications, including translations of Sextus Empiricus, and a clear majority of my articles have been on some aspect of skepticism. And this has led to a self-reinforcing tendency: because I have become known as a specialist in this area, I am more likely to be invited to contribute papers on skepticism than on anything else, and I have generally been happy to oblige. So a substantial body of papers on Greek skepticism has grown up over the years, and I started to think it would be a good idea to bring a group of them together in a single volume. I have also found that many of my essays on ancient Greek skepticism share a number of recurring themes. I therefore thought a selection of these essays published together in a single volume would serve two purposes: first, it would allow the more obscure to become better known, and second, bringing them all together would serve to highlight themes that I have touched on repeatedly from different angles, and that seem to me important.

It was not easy deciding which essays to include and which to leave out – and I received a lot of help on this, on which more later. But explaining how the volume took the shape that it did may be helpful in giving readers a sense of what I hope will be its contribution to the field. My reputation as a specialist in ancient Greek skepticism first arose mainly as I worked out a comprehensive picture of the development of the

Pyrrhonist skeptical tradition, from Pyrrho himself through Aenesidemus to Sextus Empiricus. This culminated in my book *Pyrrho, His Antecedents, and His Legacy* (2000). This aspect of my work is well known, and so I thought the new volume should largely avoid this familiar ground. In fact, while the developmental picture has continued to serve as a backdrop in some of my work, it has not generally been a central topic in the essays I have published since the book appeared. The essays included here were all written since the turn of the century, and only the earliest ("The Sign in the Pyrrhonian Tradition") makes the development of Pyrrhonism, including the order of composition of Sextus' works, a major focus of attention.

Other selection criteria that proved important were as follows: (1) I have not included papers written for handbook or companion volumes, of which I have quite a few; while sometimes the topics of these papers prompted me to extend my thinking in ways that might be of interest,[1] they include too much basic survey of material to make them suitable for a volume of this kind. (2) I have omitted papers that include a lot of discussion of the Greek language and matters of translation, since I am hoping that this volume will be reasonably accessible to those who do not know ancient Greek. (3) To create a certain unity of subject matter, I have chosen papers that are mainly on the Pyrrhonist tradition of skepticism rather than the Academic tradition. This was not too difficult, since after the very earliest phase of my career I have consistently gravitated more toward the Pyrrhonist side of things. On a similar basis, I have also omitted papers in which Nietzsche is a central component, even if they also involve Pyrrhonist skepticism to a significant degree. Still, some of the papers do touch briefly on the Academic tradition, and one ("Humor as Philosophical Subversion, Especially in the Skeptics") even ventures for a time outside skepticism altogether, while Nietzsche puts in a few appearances too. But this just shows something about the philosophical interest Pyrrhonism can arouse: it is sometimes hard to discuss without at least a glance at how it intersects with other ancient or modern philosophical movements. Most of the chapters have to do mainly, or even entirely, with Pyrrhonism as represented by Sextus Empiricus, the only Pyrrhonist of whom we have complete surviving works. But Aenesidemus also gets some attention, and Pyrrho himself occasionally gets a look-in. However, as I said, the development of Pyrrhonism is not a major concern in the volume, and it is not organized according to any historical principle.

[1] For example, Bett 2017, cited in one of the subsequent chapters.

So how is it organized? This brings me back to the point about recurring themes. One of the anonymous referees who commented on my proposal for this volume made the following very perceptive comment: "I get the distinct impression that Bett has, whether he realizes it or not, been preoccupied lately with the question of how 'his stuff' relates to philosophers around him and why they should take the time to read about it." It is true that I never really formulated an explicit agenda of this kind; and there is an element of coincidence in how some of the essays have turned out, in that at least two were written for conferences where the organizers specifically requested that we give some attention to the contemporary relevance or repercussions of the ancient views we were to write about. However, this way of approaching ancient Greek skepticism clearly caught on with me, because some of the other essays were written under no such restriction – I was given a free hand to pick my topic, so long as it was something to do with skepticism – yet I chose to explore issues that might be of contemporary interest; this applies to "Can We Be Ancient Skeptics?" and to some extent to "How Ethical Can an Ancient Skeptic Be?" More generally, I have been concerned to show Pyrrhonism as a philosophically interesting outlook. We may or may not find it attractive, and these essays get into a number of problematic features of it, as well as some more appealing ones; but whether one finds the latter or the former more prominent, I feel there is a great deal about Pyrrhonism that is at least fruitfully challenging. I hope you will feel the same way.

I see two main overlapping concerns in the essays I have selected, and the title of the volume attempts to capture these. The first is a concern with what we might call the *practice* of Pyrrhonism. Rather than addressing the general contours of the position (as much of the scholarship has done), a good many of the chapters here are interested in getting a closer look at how it actually works in detail. This can include its ways of appealing to the reader (Part I, "How the Pyrrhonists Present Themselves"), such as its methods of writing (Chapter 1), its desire to show how special it is (Chapter 2), or its use of humor (Chapter 3); it can include its approach to particular topics (Part II, "Pyrrhonists at Work: Specific Topics"), such as signs (Chapter 4), space (Chapter 5), or the Modes (Chapter 6); and it can include its practical consequences (Part III, "Life as a Pyrrhonist"), such as what a skeptical self would look like (Chapter 7), what kind of ethical outlook it might include (Chapter 8), or in general, the character of a skeptical life (Chapter 9) – and how far these may strike us as feasible or desirable. The second main thread is a concern with how Pyrrhonism, rather than being of purely antiquarian interest, often raises questions that

may make a difference to people today. The nature of the skeptical life and its feasibility (Part III) come under this heading as well, insofar as they may shed light on what we can or should expect from our own lives. But under this heading I also have in mind ways in which Pyrrhonism can make a *philosophical* difference for us (Part IV, "Intersections of Pyrrhonism with Contemporary Thought"): how setting Pyrrhonist ideas alongside ideas in contemporary philosophy, for example about happiness (Chapter 10) or about voluntarism in epistemology and the philosophy of science (Chapter 11), or reflecting on how Pyrrhonism might fare in a contemporary intellectual context (Chapter 12), can be illuminating for us both as interpreters of Pyrrhonism and as philosophers today. It will be seen that these categories are somewhat fluid, and in a few cases I was unsure in which of the four parts to place a chapter. But I hope the division into four parts, and my identification of the two main concerns animating the chapters, will serve as a useful organizing framework.

My thinking about Pyrrhonism has of course evolved over the years. None of the essays in this volume advances interpretations on which I have fundamentally changed my mind. But there are numerous issues on which the alert reader will notice some differences in perspective between different chapters. Among those I have noticed in preparing the essays for republication here are the following: (1) whether the skeptic's lack of robust commitment to ethical or other values is a defect or a virtue;[2] (2) whether the two different accounts Sextus gives of how suspension of judgment yields *ataraxia* are consistent with one another; (3) whether the interpretation of suspension of judgment as a psychological effect, rather than a rational commitment, can be sustained across the entirety of his thought; and (4) whether Sextus' claim to be a genuine inquirer while having a well-honed procedure for bringing about suspension of judgment, or his claim to practice religion in the same way as an ordinary member of society while suspending judgment on the existence of god, are hopeless inconsistencies or subtle meta-level applications of the Pyrrhonist

[2] I was taken to task by Eichorn 2014, 143, for speaking in some places as if robust commitment was always a good thing (think of the committed Nazi, etc.). While I have not entirely abandoned my worries about the skeptic's washed-out existence, discussed especially in Chapters 7 and 8, the point was well taken; and in fact I had already, in some more recent essays (Chapters 9 and 12), started speaking with approval of the skeptic's reluctance to come to conclusions. Whether this newfound appreciation was a reaction to the recent rise (or perhaps, the newly overt and unabashed expression) in many countries of visceral and unreflective political and social attitudes on the right – emphasizing nationalism, contempt for political correctness, suspicion of expertise, and a great deal else that most of us in the academy find appalling – I am not sure.

method of assembling oppositions.[3] As someone who obviously finds skepticism congenial – I would not have spent all these years studying it if I didn't identify with it to some extent – I have no problem including some opposing viewpoints in the volume taken as a whole. I won't go so far as to say that I want you to suspend judgment about the merits of these competing viewpoints. But if they cause you to reflect more deeply on these topics, and maybe come to a more fully thought-through point of view on them yourself, that seems to me all to the good.

Most of these chapters were written in the past decade (as of the time of writing); and even aside from the one new essay (Chapter 6), two have not yet been published in the volumes for which they were originally commissioned (Chapters 3 and 12). In the case of the older ones (I am thinking especially of Chapters 4, 7, and 10), I suspect I might have chosen a somewhat different focus if I was writing on the same topics today – partly because of my own evolving views on Pyrrhonism, and partly because of subsequent developments either in the scholarship on ancient Greek philosophy or in contemporary philosophical debate on the issues I deal with. But, quite apart from my lack of concern about conflicting interpretations, mentioned just now, there is a limit to how much one can change an essay and still count as republishing the *same* essay. So I have contented myself with some minor rewording – for example, to take out or explain references to other papers in the volumes where these essays originally appeared – a few additional references to pertinent work that has appeared since their original publication, and other adjustments of the same kind. In keeping with my desire to make the volume accessible to non-classicists, I have also adopted a consistent policy of transliterating Greek – some of the essays originally used the Greek alphabet – except in a very few places in footnotes where purely textual issues are at stake (and where only those who know ancient Greek will be interested). A few essays have a nod toward the places in which they were originally presented, in a choice of example or a reference to scholarship by someone from that locale; these too seem to me harmless and I have not attempted to change them. All in all, then, anyone who has read these essays before will find little alteration.

[3] The one topic on which I wish I had been able to include a complete essay here is skepticism and religion. But of the two papers I have written on this subject (Bett 2009; Bett 2015c), the first falls into the handbook/companion category, while much of the second is rather more detailed and technical than is appropriate for this volume. (It is also published by Cambridge University Press, which understandably considers it bad form to recycle materials it has already published.) However, Sextus' attitude toward religion does receive some mention in the essays that are included.

Many people are thanked in the individual essays. It has been an immense privilege to be invited to participate in all the conferences – some in spectacular and memorable places – and to contribute to all the collections of papers that were the starting points of the materials in this volume, as well as to receive so much thoughtful and helpful comment on earlier versions. Scholarship in ancient Greek philosophy today is an international collaboration that is intensely serious but also, I think, quite a bit more friendly and congenial than it was at the beginning of my career. I see this as part of a more general transformation in philosophy; while much more work undoubtedly remains to be done, there is a lot less peremptory dismissiveness and a lot more concern for inclusiveness, in all its many dimensions, than there used to be. In any case, returning to the specific milieu of ancient Greek philosophy, I feel very lucky to belong to this world; and now that I am pretty clearly in the latter part of my career, I hope I am doing enough to help keep it as vibrant as it now is.

There are a few additional people I would like to thank for help that relates specifically to the production of this volume. First, Hilary Gaskin, the philosophy editor at Cambridge University Press, who was encouraging about my initial proposal for the volume, and who then gave me very useful comments at several stages, which allowed me to get the volume into a shape that was practical for the press to publish. This was not simply a matter of bringing down the number of essays to something viable (though that was part of it); it was also a matter of getting into focus the unifying themes of the essays I wanted to include, and giving the volume a definite character, as opposed to being an amorphous pile of papers in the general area of Pyrrhonism. My first proposed title for the volume, "Ventures in Pyrrhonist Skepticism," may give some idea of how vague I was about this to begin with. The two anonymous readers of the proposal were also extremely helpful in this regard. The one with the perceptive comment noted above helped me to see better what I was doing. But it was the other reader who, while also making encouraging comments about the general project, pointed to a real deficiency in how I was conceiving the volume, and suggested that I think more about how the essays hang together, and why I had chosen these ones and not others. The three of them together made a big difference; without them, I would not have been able to write these introductory remarks in anything like their present form, and the layout of the volume would have been much less clearly defined.

Prefaces to volumes of this kind often include a long list of people with whom the author has discussed issues or shown drafts of papers. I don't

have a list like that. This is partly because, as I've said, individuals who helped me improve a given chapter are thanked in the footnotes to that chapter. But it's also because I don't spend a lot of time trying out ideas on colleagues at an early stage – which I think is one impetus for such lists. For whatever reason (maybe just because I am somewhat of a loner by temperament), I prefer to write my papers by myself and *then* see what people think of them; I value feedback – no question about that – but I don't tend to seek it until I already have a story more or less worked out on my own. But there is one notable exception to this pattern: I thank my Johns Hopkins colleague Michael Williams for a great many conversations over the years that have enhanced my understanding of Pyrrhonist skepticism. Mike is known mainly as a leading contemporary epistemologist. But he also has substantial historical interests and expertise, and this includes Sextus. We have taught a graduate seminar together on (mostly) ancient Greek skepticism three times now, spanning a period in which most of these essays were written, and each time I have learned more from him. It would be impossible to tease out exactly which of whatever insights this volume contains owe something to discussions with him, but I am sure they are not few in number.

Acknowledgments

Listed below are the original places of publication of all the chapters except Chapter 6, which is new. I am grateful both to the editors of these original volumes and to their publishers for permission to reprint.

Chapter 1. "The Pyrrhonist's Dilemma: What to Write If You Have Nothing to Say," in Michael Erler and Jan Erik Hessler, eds., *Argument und Literarischer Form in antiker Philosophie*, Akten des 3. Kongresses der Gesellschaft für antike Philosophie 2010 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 389–410.

Chapter 2. "Why Care Whether Skepticism Is Different from Other Philosophies?," *Philosophie antique* 15 (2015), 27–52 (Special issue entitled *Questions sur le scepticisme pyrrhonien*), ed. Thomas Bénatouil, Jean-Baptiste Gourinat, and Michel Narcy (Villeneuve D'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion).

Chapter 3. "Humor as Philosophical Subversion, Especially in the Skeptics," in Pierre Destrée and Franco Trivigno, eds., *Laughter and Comedy in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

Chapter 4. "The Sign in the Pyrrhonian Tradition," published as "Le signe dans la tradition pyrrhonienne," in José Kany-Turpin, ed., *Signe et prédiction dans l'antiquité* (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2005), 29–48.

Chapter 5. "Aenesidemus the Anti-Physicist," in G. Ranocchia, Ch. Helmig, and Ch. Horn, eds., *Space in Hellenistic Philosophy: Critical Studies in Ancient Physics* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 141–58.

Chapter 6. "The Modes in Sextus: Theory and Practice" was written specially for this volume.

Chapter 7. "What Kind of Self Can a Greek Skeptic Have?," in Pauliina Remes and Juha Sihvola, eds., *Ancient Philosophy of the Self* (New York: Springer, 2008), 139–54.

Chapter 8. "How Ethical Can an Ancient Skeptic Be?," in Diego Machuca, ed., *Pyrrhonism in Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 3–17.

Chapter 9. "Living as a Skeptic," published as "Als Skeptiker leben," in Gerhard Ernst, ed., *Philosophie als Lebenskunst: Antike Vorbilder, moderne Perspektiven* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2016), 232–56.

Chapter 10. "Can an Ancient Greek Skeptic Be *Eudaimôn* (or Happy)? And What Difference Does the Answer Make to Us?," *Journal of Ancient Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (2012), ed. Marco Zingano, online: www.journals.usp.br/filosofiaantiga/index.

Chapter 11. "On Pyrrhonism, Stances, and Believing What You Want," *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 5 (2015), ed. Diego Machuca and Duncan Pritchard (Leiden: Brill), 126–44.

Chapter 12. "Can We Be Ancient Skeptics?," published as "Le scepticisme ancien est-il viable aujourd'hui?," in Diego Machuca and Stéphane Marchand, eds., *Les raisons du doute: études sur le scepticisme antique* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, forthcoming).

Abbreviations

DK	H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th edition (Berlin: Weidmann, 1951).
DL	Diogenes Laertius
KSA	Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980).
LS	A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).
LSJ	Liddell-Scott-Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968 and subsequent printings – Revised Supplement, 1996).
M 1–6	Sextus Empiricus, *Against Those in the Disciplines* (*Pros Mathêmatikous*, or in Latin, *Adversus Mathematicos*)
M 7–11	Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, *Against the Physicists*, and *Against the Ethicists*, which were almost certainly preceded by a lost book or books explaining the skeptical outlook in general terms. The whole work is referred to by Sextus as *Skeptika Hupomnêmata*, *Skeptical Treatises*. The label *M* 7–11 is due to these books having been wrongly thought to be a continuation of *M* 1–6; despite the obvious error, this nomenclature is deeply entrenched.
PH	Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*Purrôneiai Hupotupôseis*)

Other abbreviations for ancient texts are given in the Index Locorum.