

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03988-8 - The Norms of Nature: Studies in Hellenistic Ethics

Edited by Malcolm Schofield and Gisela Striker

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Part I

Argument, belief and emotion

Cambridge University Press

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1 Doing without objective values: ancient and modern strategies

Julia Annas

I

Before doing philosophy, we tend to think that people, actions and institutions are good or bad, praiseworthy or deplorable. That we are wrong to have these beliefs is a point on which ancient and modern sceptics appear to agree. Ancient sceptical arguments about proof, say, or perception, are different from modern analogues, and in important respects less radical.¹ But when we read the arguments that Sextus Empiricus retails to the effect that nothing is by nature good or bad, they appear familiar.

The appearance is misleading, however; ancient and modern uses of, and reactions to, sceptical arguments about value are profoundly unlike. If this is so, then pointing it out is of more than historical interest; it alerts us to a number of interesting possibilities about value, and moral value in particular.

I shall begin by looking at the ancient arguments (few and easily surveyable, it turns out) which try to undermine our confidence that people and actions really are good or bad. I shall also look at the ancient sceptics' account of the benefits of having been convinced by these arguments. Then I shall consider what seem to have been the standard ancient objections to moral scepticism, and the strength of the sceptic's defence. Doing so will, I hope, bring out the radical difference between ancient and modern attitudes to sceptical arguments about moral value.

Discussions of ancient philosophy often stress the continuity of ancient concerns with ours, and sometimes it is felt that if no such continuity can be established, then studying the ancient texts loses its point. In this area, however, the reverse seems to be true. Modern moral philosophy has been rejuvenated by study precisely of discontinuities in moral concern, and of different understandings of morality. Why this should be so is rather a mystery. One's understanding of an essentially modern sceptical problem, such as scepticism about induction, is not necessarily furthered by realising the extent of the gap between it and ancient analogous but different problems, such as sceptical arguments about 'signs'. But in the area of

¹ The importantly restricted scope of ancient scepticism is brought out in different ways by Richter (1902, 1904) and by Burnyeat (1982).

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moral value the problematic nature of the concepts involved makes awareness of differences often more fruitful than awareness of similarities.

II

In Sextus' extended compilation, arguments for moral scepticism come right at the end of both the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*PH*) and of the section of the *Adversus Mathematicos* (*M*) that we number as VII–XI. This position need not reflect lack of interest; it merely reflects the way that sceptics gave their destructive attention to topics methodically, in accordance with the ancient division of philosophy into logic, physics and ethics. (Cf. *PH* II 13; Diogenes Laertius IX 90; this seems to go right back to Aenesidemus.)² One of Aenesidemus' Ten Modes is also 'mostly concerned with ethics' (*PH* I 145) and since there is clear overlap between this Mode and some of Sextus' arguments (at least in *PH* III) it seems best to begin with it.

I call it the Tenth Mode, following Sextus' order (it is the fifth in Diogenes and the eighth in Philo).³ Sextus gives the fullest and most organised version, but the outlines of an already ordered argument are visible behind all three variants.

Sextus carefully distinguishes five factors which are relevant to our beliefs about values. These are

- (1) Lifestyle (*agōgē*): the way one structures one's life either as an individual deliberately copying another individual, or as part of a community.
- (2) Customs or habits (*ethē*):⁴ unwritten codes of behaviour that bring it about, for example, that even where there is no law about it, people just do not copulate in public (ancient writers seem obsessed with alleged public performance of this private act).
- (3) Laws (*nomoi*): conventions that are backed by definite sanctions against those who break them.
- (4) Mythical beliefs (*mythikai pisteis*) about various divine and fictional matters.⁵

² In Photius' account (*Bibliotheca* 169–70) Aenesidemus' last three books were devoted to ethical matters. Three out of eight books does suggest a higher level of interest than we find in Sextus, whose account of ethics is decidedly thinner and slighter than his discussions of logic and physics.

³ Sextus, *PH* I 145–63; Diogenes IX 83–4; Philo, *de Ebrietate* 193–205. See Annas and Barnes (1985) ch. 13 for translations and discussion of this Mode.

⁴ Diogenes' manuscripts omit this, and have the meaningless τεχνικὰς συνθήκας. Menagius' emendation to ἔθνικὰς συνθήκας seems obviously right. See Annas and Barnes (1985) Appendix E for further discussion.

⁵ Philo omits these, but this can be understood (without postulating a separate source or intermediary) given his concern to make the Modes relevant to exegesis of a Jewish theme; pagan myths would be out of place.

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- (5) Dogmatic conceptions (*dogmatikai hupolēpseis*)⁶ of which the examples are various abstract philosophical theories about the constitution of the universe and the providence of the gods.

How are these factors relevant to scepticism? None of our sources make this explicit. Diogenes just lists examples of laws which differ, customs which differ, and so on. Persians, he implausibly claims, marry their daughters, Massagetae have wives in common and Cilicians shamelessly enjoy piracy, but (we civilised) Greeks do none of these things. Why, however, should this lead us to any kind of scepticism, rather than to complacency, since we civilised Greeks seem to have got it right? Sextus produces conflicts by systematically listing examples of a lifestyle clashing with a custom, a lifestyle clashing with a law, a custom clashing with a law, and so on, until we have gone through every possible combination of the five factors. However, while such clashes do occur, they also get resolved, whether by compromise, prosecution or whatever; it is still not clear how we get to scepticism.

The strategy of the Tenth Mode becomes clear from what we know from elsewhere, and in particular the other Modes,⁷ about ancient sceptical argument. The clashes Sextus points to are evidence for the conflicts which do have sceptical import: conflicts in the way things appear good or bad to people.

Take Sextus' third example (a hardy perennial in ancient sceptical texts, despite its falsity, like the false belief that sufferers from jaundice see everything yellow). Indians have sex in public, other nations not. This is a conflict in that it implies that having sex in public appears acceptable and good to Indians, and unacceptable and bad to other nations. This is a clash between customs; we can generalise, if we use a generic term, say 'persuasion', for all five factors, and say that the Mode gives us material with which to produce the following kind of conflict. One thing (action, practice, etc.) appears to have positive value (to be good, praiseworthy, etc.) to people of one persuasion. But the very same thing appears to have negative value to people of a different persuasion. And obviously both persuasions can't be right – the thing can't have both positive and negative value.

The sceptic proceeds this way in order to shake our beliefs, for these often rest on our acceptance of our own persuasion. Having been brought

⁶ Philo does not name these; but he clearly deals with them (198ff.), making the transition by a rhetorical flourish of his own. He alters the structure of the Mode somewhat by giving so much stress to philosophical disagreement and by introducing arguments of his own.

⁷ See Annas and Barnes (1985) ch. 3 for an account of the structure and history of the Modes.

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up in certain customs, I believe public copulation to be unacceptable. When I encounter people who, having been brought up in other habits, do not think it wrong, my belief that it is wrong is weakened. The sceptic aims to get us to the stage of *isostheneia*, ‘equipollence’, the state where I can find no more to be said for than against the belief that public copulation is wrong. For if I get to this point, I will suspend judgment about it; I will lose all commitment to any belief in its wrongness. It may still, of course, *appear* to me to be wrong; I will retain certain reactions to it. But I will have lost the belief that it is wrong – and equally, of course, be unable to acquire the belief that it is right. Suspension of belief is not a conclusion of any inference; rather, pointing out differences in persuasion puts us in a position where we are led to find no more reason to hold our beliefs about value than their opposites, and hence, as a matter of fact, to suspend judgment. Moral scepticism thus comes in as part of a wider sceptical strategy; differences of persuasion lead us to suspend judgment about values just as differences in distance, species, frequency and so on lead us to suspend judgment about other features of the world. The sceptic regards people who believe things to be good or bad as misguided, and in need of correction; but this is achieved not by altering their beliefs, but by putting them in a position where they lose them. To do this, all the weight, in Diogenes and Sextus, is put on establishing the ‘conflict of appearances’: I believe that public copulation is wrong, because it appears to me a certain way; but there are others to whom it appears differently, and it is pointing this out that brings me to lose the belief.

Philo has two different arguments, which are isolated in ancient scepticism and may be his own contribution. One (§ 202) is that dispute is, where persuasions are concerned, chronic and hopeless. It is not just that uneducated people disagree – philosophers, who have given all their time and talent to it over generations, are still locked in apparently insoluble disagreement over questions like providence and the meaning of life; and this strongly suggests that their disagreement is, in fact, insoluble.

The other (§§ 196–7, 199) is that people’s habits and upbringing differ so totally that they are bound to find that things appear differently to them, and that they disagree. ‘This being so, who is so senseless and idiotic as to say steadfastly that such-and-such is just or intelligent or fine or advantageous? Whatever one person determines to be such will be nullified by someone else whose practice from childhood has been the contrary.’ Philo is not entirely clear here, but it is reasonable to see here at least a proto-version of the argument, popular with modern sceptics, from preferred explanation. Disagreements over value correlate strongly with

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differences in persuasions. The sceptic claims that it is reasonable to explain the disagreements, not as genuine disagreements about a real subject-matter, but as merely being the effects of the different persuasions. As Mackie puts it, 'Disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect people's adherence to and participation in different forms of life. The causal connexion seems to be mainly that way round: it is that people approve of monogamy because they participate in a monogamous way of life rather than that they participate in a monogamous way of life because they approve of monogamy' (Mackie (1977), p. 36).

Philo's two arguments are interesting in that they are more limited than the conflict of appearances argument. They lead to a piecemeal scepticism; they apply only where conflict *is* chronic, only if and where disagreement *is* best explained by differences in persuasion. In any case they do not form part of the standard ancient strategy for moral scepticism: their force was probably unappreciated.

In *PH* III and *M* XI Sextus retails a string of more elaborate arguments 'against the moral philosophers'. The Tenth Mode worked on the level of common sense; these arguments attack moral philosophy – the theories and arguments of Platonists, Stoics and Epicureans. But the same simple strategy applies, and only its application is more complex. Moral philosophers make claims about value, which recommend themselves to us *via* their arguments. The sceptic aims to get us to equipollence: both sides are equally convincing, there is nothing to tip the balance either way; and we find ourselves suspending judgment on philosophical claims about good, pleasure and value in general.

Sextus begins these arguments by taking the field of ethics to be demarcated by the division of things into good, bad and indifferent.⁸ (This is, perhaps, a rather remote and boring way of beginning ethics, all too reminiscent of G. E. Moore's conviction that the fundamental question in ethics was the meaning of 'good'; but this is the fault not of Sextus but his targets.) In both books Sextus adds a long critique of the supposed 'art of living'; but his arguments here are all directed to notions like those of skill and learning, not to specifically ethical matters; and I shall pass them over here.⁹

In both passages Sextus points out that there is widespread disagree-

⁸ *M* XI adds a rather stupid critique of the nature of this division considered solely *qua* division (3–20); this is irrelevant to ethics, and its inclusion perhaps an indication that Sextus himself was more interested in logic than in ethics proper.

⁹ Sextus himself seems to regard this topic as an *addendum*: cf. *M* XI 167: ὄθεν περιἀγαθῶν καὶ κακῶν ἀποδόντες, ἀφ' ὧν αἱ ἀπορίαι ἐπὶ πάντα σχεδὸν τὸν ἠθικὸν διατείνουσι τόπον, φέρε τὸ μετὰ τοῦτο σκοπῶμεν εἶ ἔστι τις περὶ τὸν βίον τέχνη.

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ment over the definition of ‘good’ (and so of ‘bad’ and ‘indifferent’ – *PH* III 169–78, *M* XI 21–41). He spends some time on particular definitions of ‘good’, notably the Stoics’, and retails some *ad hominem* objections, but the general sceptical objection is to hold against *all* purported definitions (*M* XI 35); its form is clearer in *M* than in *PH*. These definitions cannot give the essence or nature of good. A definition that did, would put an end to controversy; but controversy has manifestly not ceased, so these definitions must have failed to make the essence of good clear. At most, claims that good is ‘choiceworthy’ or ‘productive of happiness’ and the like can tell us what happens to be true of good, its accidents or *sumbebēkota*. In fact, though, they can’t make a decent job even of that; for we can’t be told informatively even what a thing happens to be until we know its nature. Therefore, defining good as e.g. ‘choiceworthy’ tells us neither what good essentially is nor even what is contingently true of it. Therefore we should suspend judgment about our conception of good.

This argument is clearly exploiting the assumption that when a definition gives rise to disagreement, we have a conflict in the way things appear which cannot be rationally resolved. ‘If what good is had been shown by the definitions mentioned, they would not have gone on fighting [*epestasiazon*] as though the nature of the good were still unknown’ (*M* XI 37). Once we have started arguing over the definition, thinks the sceptic, we will either just carry on or end up suspending judgment because both sides have come to seem equally convincing.

Sextus goes on to claim that people disagree endlessly also over what things (people, actions) are good (bad, indifferent) (*PH* III 179–234, *M* XI 43–109). In both passages there are subsidiary arguments – what’s good can’t just be what we choose (*PH* III 183–90, *M* XI 79–89);¹⁰ the Epicureans can’t argue from animals to what is good for people (*PH* III 193–6, *M* XI 96–109). In *PH* III Sextus swamps us with a flood of examples, often overlapping with those of the Tenth Mode (199–234); in *M* XI he has got bored by all the publicly copulating Indians and incestuous Persians, and limits himself to typical examples (47–67, 90–5). But in both passages the core of the argument is quite simple (*PH* III 179–82, *M* XI 68–78): if anything were good by nature, as the philosophers claim, it should be good, and so positively motivating, for everyone. But in fact different people are differently motivated, and disagree over what is good. We can’t accept all

¹⁰ Richter (1902), pp. 281–4, discusses this argument, claiming that here ancient scepticism is (uniquely) committed to denying the existence of objective values, rather than suspending judgment about them. Sextus, he claims, does not introduce the argument as being merely one side of the discussion, but as one he agrees with. But the thesis, that the good is what we choose, is explicitly introduced as a view held by others (*PH* III 183), and Sextus then shows systematically that, of various interpretations of this, none is tenable.

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the claims, because they conflict; and conflict cannot be resolved, either by intuition or by argument.

We can see the basic sceptical strategy at work. Every belief is countered, to produce a conflict, and argument *pro* is countered by argument *con*. The disagreement cannot be resolved; as a result, both sides end up appearing as convincing, and judgment is suspended; we cease to be able to commit ourselves to the original beliefs or to their denials. Diogenes brings this out economically at IX 101 (which derives from the same source as some of Sextus' arguments, since they share an example: pleasure appears good to Epicurus, bad to Antisthenes). People disagree about what is good; the arguments on either side are equally compelling; so we end up with suspension of judgment about the nature of the good.

In *M*, though not in *PH*, Sextus confuses this line of thought with another. In *M* xi 69 he introduces the idea that what is by nature good should be *common* (*koinon*) to all.¹¹ The denial of this is presented as a form of relativism: nothing is good in a way common to all, but things are good relative to particular agents' particular situations. And Sextus goes on to speak of the sceptic as holding just this: what is good is always relative, not absolute, and this is the sceptic's liberating discovery (78, 114–18). But this is a confusion. Moral absolutism, the belief that there are general rules or principles that apply to everybody without exception in all circumstances, cuts right across the issue of moral realism. The claim that 'this is good relative to me, though it might not be good relative to you' can be a perfectly good claim about moral reality.

Confusion of moral realism with moral absolutism is, apparently, endemic in moral philosophy. It probably gains some of its attraction from the fact that sceptics have often had to argue against opponents who were both moral realists and moral absolutists. (Hume is, in the third book of the *Treatise*, arguing against such opponents; hence the controversy over what his own position is.)¹² Sextus is by no means alone in failing to distinguish relativism from the rejection of realism.¹³ The same failing dogs discussion of moral and political norms since the fifth-century sophists; often it is assumed that if norms hold at all they must hold absolutely. Anyone who teaches moral philosophy will find that pupils depressingly often make the same assumption.

¹¹ The word *koinon* occurs in Diogenes IX 101, which clearly derives from the same source (cf. the example of pleasure in both passages); but the confusion is absent. This might be just a lucky accident of compression, but it is absent from *PH* III too, and seems to have been imported by Sextus himself into his reworking of the argument in *M* xi.

¹² Cf. the discussion by Mackie (1980), which distinguishes various possibilities.

¹³ The particular confusion in *M* xi may go back to Aenesidemus, if he is the source of the arguments against the existence of good and bad, as well as of the frankly subjectivist position ascribed to him at XI 42–4.

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Still, it is a confusion, and one that Sextus could reasonably have been expected to avoid, for three reasons at least. Firstly, he goes on to argue that the offending belief (that there is a good common to all) is a source of troubling anxiety and perturbation, whereas the relativist thought that it's only *my* good brings relief and mental equilibrium (M XI 118). But this is *obviously* wrong; however relative to me, *my* good is still *my* good, just as real and troubling a part of moral reality as any universal good. Presumably the thought is: once I see that my belief that, for example, honesty is good is only *my* belief, held for various contingent reasons, it will lose significance for me, being now regarded in much the same light as my likes and dislikes, which I do not expect others to share. But the content of my belief that honesty is good has essential reference to the world and other people; it is still appropriate matter for concern however aware I am that it is only *my* belief. It should have been clear to Sextus that relief and detachment can supervene only on suspension of belief as to whether something really is good, not on the belief that it really is good, but only relative to me.

Secondly, it had already been clearly stated by at least one philosopher that even if values are relative to a group or individual they are just as real (and therefore just as troubling) as any non-relative items. Polystratus the Epicurean¹⁴ had claimed that it is a mistake to think that 'good' or 'just', even if we concede that they are relative terms, refer to items that are any less real than the referents of non-relative terms.

Thirdly, relativism is, in ancient terms, not a form of *scepticism* at all, for it leaves the agent holding beliefs. And, however narrowed-down the content of those beliefs – 'this is good in certain respects for me here now in this situation' – they are still beliefs; the relativist is a dogmatist, not a sceptic, for the sceptic aims to shed his beliefs by suspending judgment. It is strange that Sextus should confuse two such utterly unlike positions; all we can say is that he does it elsewhere as well, in areas where there is even less excuse for confusing realism and absolutism.¹⁵

How good are the ancient arguments? Philo's arguments, being atypical, can perhaps be left aside. In any case their effectiveness will have to be made out for each case, for we should not be ready to accept ahead of time that *all* chronic disagreement is, just as such, insoluble; or that differences

¹⁴ Polystratus *De contemptu inani*, chs. 6 and 7. Striker (1983b) points out the importance of this for the Modes as a whole. Indelli in ch. 5 of his Introduction to *De cont. in.* claims that the attack is directed at contemporary sceptics; if so, they missed the point of it.

¹⁵ See Annas and Barnes (1985) Index of Topics, s.v. 'Relativism and Scepticism' for discussions of the various passages in the Modes (with reference to others passages in Sextus) where relativism and scepticism are, puzzlingly, confounded.

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of persuasion will always be a preferred explanation of disagreement about value; or, indeed, that such explanation will render idle our initial assumption that the disagreement is genuine.

It is the conflicting-appearances argument which is the heart of ancient sceptical strategy; and here we may well raise queries at two stages. Firstly, do the appearances really conflict? Even if persuasions differ as the sceptic says they do (and much of the ancient material is transparently fictional), must this be because people have conflicting appearances of value? What look superficially like disagreements over value can often be better interpreted as consensus over value coupled with differences over what particular means are appropriate; thus the fact that Ethiopians tattoo their babies while Greeks do not reveals more community than difference in shared beliefs about attitudes to babies. Often the sceptic is at least taking a short cut.

But even where appearances do conflict, do we get to suspension of judgment? Only if we get to equipollence, if we are convinced that nothing tips the balance one way or the other, because either side is equally convincing. And here the ancient sources do let us down. As they stand, few of the examples piled up in the Tenth Mode and *PH* III have the power to make us feel any uneasiness. Why should we care that Crates and Hipparchia copulated in public, or that the early Stoics thought that there could be situations where incest and cannibalism would be all right? The obvious response is not to be shaken, but to conclude that Crates and Hipparchia were being deliberately shameless, and that Zeno and Chrysippus were not prescribing for the sort of situations that it would be reasonable to worry about. Indeed, we can find a certain tension, at least in Sextus, who plainly enjoys retailing examples of shocking and upsetting persuasions. For the more shocking an example, the *less* likely it is to undermine our belief that we are right to believe the opposite. Many of Sextus' examples would be more likely to reinforce than to weaken his audience's moral beliefs. And even the blander examples can hardly on their own lead us to abandon our commitment to our own beliefs. We need more argument to convince us that there is nothing to choose between the alternatives, that neither is preferable. To this Sextus could certainly retort that there are certain general all-purpose sceptical arguments which he frequently uses for the purpose; but he could not appeal to anything relevant to ethics in particular, and that is what we need.

Why cannot argument settle matters in favour of one alternative over another? Where ethics is concerned Sextus simply retains his general confidence that no argument is immune, that an equally powerful counter-argument can always be found. He shows no interest in the idea that