

Cambridge University Press
0521383390 - The Toils of Scepticism
Jonathan Barnes
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

The toils of scepticism

Cambridge University Press
0521383390 - The Toils of Scepticism
Jonathan Barnes
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

The Toils of Scepticism

JONATHAN BARNES

*Professor of Ancient Philosophy in the University of Oxford,
and Fellow of Balliol College*



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 0521383390 - The Toils of Scepticism
 Jonathan Barnes
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1990

First published 1990
 Reprinted 1994

British Library cataloguing in publication data

Barnes, Jonathan, 1942–
 The toils of scepticism.
 1. Greek philosophy, ancient period. Scepticism
 I. Title
 186
 ISBN 0-521-38339-0

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Barnes, Jonathan.
 The toils of scepticism/Jonathan Barnes.
 p. cm.
 ISBN 0-521-38339-0
 1. Sextus, Empiricus. 2. Skepticism--History. I. Title.
 B623.B37 1990
 186'.1--dc20 89-27951 CIP

ISBN 0 521 38339 0 hardback

Transferred to digital printing 2004

Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>page vii</i>
1 <i>Disagreement</i>	<i>I</i>
2 <i>Infinite regression</i>	<i>36</i>
3 <i>Reciprocity</i>	<i>58</i>
4 <i>Hypotheses</i>	<i>90</i>
5 <i>The sceptic's net</i>	<i>113</i>
<i>Note on the ancient authors</i>	<i>145</i>
<i>Index of passages</i>	<i>151</i>
<i>Index of persons</i>	<i>154</i>
<i>Index of Greek terms</i>	<i>156</i>
<i>Index of subjects</i>	<i>158</i>

Introduction

Greek philosophy knew two main varieties of scepticism, one taking its name from Pyrrho of Elis and the other associated with a particular phase in the history of Plato's Academy. My concern in this book is with Pyrrhonian scepticism, and I say nothing about the Academic variety. For the sake of brevity, I usually leave the words 'sceptic' and 'scepticism' without a qualifying adjective; it should be understood that it is the Pyrrhonian sceptic and Pyrrhonian scepticism to which I mean to refer.

Pyrrhonian scepticism had a long career, in the course of which it assumed significantly different forms. For us, its chief representative is Sextus Empiricus, the only Pyrrhonian whose works have survived. I shall be concerned, almost exclusively, with the scepticism which is expressed in the pages of Sextus. Thus I ignore the earlier phases of Pyrrhonism, which pose special problems both of an historical and of a philosophical nature;¹ and I ignore the few texts outside Sextus which offer us additional evidence for the later history of the Pyrrhonian philosophy.

Of Sextus himself we know little.² He was a doctor by profession. He lived in the second century AD. He was a prolific author, but not an original thinker. We possess three of his writings. One offers an outline of scepticism, giving first a general account of the nature of Pyrrhonism and then a survey of the arguments which the Pyrrhonians advanced against the Dogmatists. ('The Dogmatists', οἱ δογματικοί, is the title by which the sceptics referred generically

1 For Pyrrho himself (c.360–270 BC) see the fundamental study by Fernanda Decleva Caizzi, *Pirrone – testimonianze* (Naples, 1981).

2 See, most recently, D.K. House, 'The Life of Sextus Empiricus', *Classical Quarterly* 30, 1980, 227–38.

Cambridge University Press
 0521383390 - The Toils of Scepticism
 Jonathan Barnes
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

to non-sceptical philosophers.) The destructive arguments are arranged in three sections, corresponding to the three traditional parts of Dogmatic philosophy, logic and physics and ethics. A second work collects a larger quantity of these destructive arguments, similarly organized in three sections. A third work consists of six essays directed against six Dogmatic arts – grammar, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astrology, music.³ In all three of his works Sextus is largely concerned to assemble and arrange existing material: he draws on – and, sometimes at least, actually copies from – earlier Pyrrhonian sources.⁴

It is a difficult question whether the three works present a single and coherent form of Pyrrhonism. Some scholars find important differences among the works, and some scholars find important differences within the works – differences which are perhaps to be explained by the interesting hypothesis that Sextus' own views underwent some change or development, or else by the dispiriting hypothesis that Sextus nonchalantly drew on different sources in different parts of his writings. Such suppositions and hypotheses raise issues of scholarly significance, but in this book I pass them by.

My particular subject is what I may call the Agrippan aspect of Sextus' scepticism, the aspect which in some fashion derives from the shadowy figure of Agrippa.⁵ Much of Sextus' work is Agrippan in inspiration or colouring, but by no means all of his thought was moulded by Agrippa. (And so I shall say nothing about some of the most celebrated parts of Sextus' writings which derive from the

3 The three works are: (1) *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, in three Books (the title is customarily abbreviated to *PH*); (2) a work in five Books, normally known as *Against the Mathematicians* VII–XI (the title is abbreviated to *M*); and (3) the six Books of *Against the Mathematicians* I–VI (also abbreviated to *M*). As the titles indicate, *M* VII–XI and *M* I–VI used to be printed as parts of a single treatise, but they are two perfectly distinct works, and the modern nomenclature is unfortunate.

4 For Sextus as a copyist see Jonathan Barnes, 'Diogene Laerzio e il Pirronismo', *Elenchos* 7, 1986, 385–427, with references to the pioneering studies by Karel Janáček. (Add now K. Janáček, 'Ο ἔξ ὑποθέσεως τρόπος', *Eirene* 24, 1987, 55–65.)

5 Agrippa is referred to by Diogenes Laertius (IX 88); and he is presumably the eponym of the *Agrippa*, written by an unknown sceptic called Apellas (see Diogenes Laertius, IX 106). Otherwise he is never mentioned in the ancient texts. We may reasonably conjecture that he flourished at the end of the first century BC (see below, pp. 121–2), and hence a century and a half before Sextus.

Cambridge University Press
 0521383390 - The Toils of Scepticism
 Jonathan Barnes
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

somewhat less obscure figure of Aenesidemus.⁶) Again, my interest focusses on a single facet of the Agrippan aspect of Sextus' Pyrrhonism. For it is the general form which Agrippan argumentation characteristically takes and the general structures which Agrippan scepticism characteristically erects which constitute the central theme of this book. And I pay little attention, except by way of occasional illustration, to the numerous particular instances of these forms and structures which occur throughout Sextus' writings.

After such disclaimers, the reader may pardonably wonder if he has not opened a book of piddling breadth, a learned monograph – or, at least, a monograph – which prescind from everything which made ancient scepticism a subtle and living philosophy, and which limits its outlook by the close and narrowing blinkers of leathery scholarship.

But I claim three things for my circumscribed subject. First, and exegetically: that the forms and structures I discuss were among the most important aspects of Pyrrhonism, so that to study them is to study the soul of ancient scepticism. Secondly, and historically: that these same forms and structures have had a unique influence on the subsequent history of sceptical enquiry, and hence, more generally, on the history of epistemology or the enquiry into the nature and scope of human knowledge: the Agrippan forms lie at the heart of the western philosophical tradition. Thirdly, and philosophically: that these forms and structures remain today among the central issues in the theory of knowledge; that every modern epistemologist must take notice of them; and that they still provide the subject of epistemology with some of its most cunning puzzles and most obdurate problems.

My book has both exegetical and philosophical pretensions. Exegetically, it centres, as I have said, on Sextus. I have attempted to give a comprehensive treatment of my topics insofar as they appear in Sextus' pages. In addition, I have from time to time referred to other ancient authors and ancient texts. Here I have not, of course, been exhaustive in my citations or references; rather, I

⁶ Aenesidemus flourished in the first half of the first century BC. But little enough is reported about him – and most of that is controversial. See e.g. John Glucker, *Antiochus and the Late Academy* (Göttingen, 1978), pp.116–19.

Cambridge University Press
 0521383390 - The Toils of Scepticism
 Jonathan Barnes
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

have picked a small sample of texts in order to indicate that Sextus and the Pyrrhonists were, from an intellectual point of view, neither hermits nor pariahs – their concerns and interests concerned and interested other philosophers and scientists.

The book is not an introduction to ancient Pyrrhonism.⁷ But I have tried to make my historical remarks elementary and I have tried to avoid esoteric scholarship. I hope that readers with no antecedent knowledge of Greek philosophy will find the book intelligible. Historical allusions in the text call upon no pre-existing acquaintance. (And the Note on the ancient authors offers a minimal *mise en scène*.) All quotations from ancient works are done into English; and those few Greek words which appear in the body of the book are all explained on their first appearance. (The footnotes sometimes cite Greek without translation.) Greek words are written in the Greek alphabet. I was once a champion of transliteration, but I now find it both aesthetically displeasing and pedagogically fatuous – I cannot believe that an intelligent and Greekless reader who has had the Greek term for disagreement Englished for him will somehow find it easier to understand the sign ‘*diaphōnia*’ than the sign ‘*διαφωνία*’.

The philosophical pretensions of the book are modest. All the issues I discuss arise from the work of Sextus. I have, of course, selected those points which I – and, I hope, other philosophers – find exciting; and I have on occasion developed a point somewhat further than the Greek texts do. But my ambitions are essentially determined by the texts. I have been concerned primarily to describe and present the real philosophical difficulties which the texts raise. I do not claim to have resolved any of the difficulties. I do not even claim to have contributed to their resolution – except insofar as a plain description may itself make such a contribution.

I hope that the philosophical parts of the book will be intelligible to readers who may be interested in ancient thought but have no antecedent knowledge of modern philosophy. I have tried to avoid jargon, and I have tried to avoid covert allusions to modern issues or modern authors. I have also tried to write plainly and to write with lucidity. But the issues are difficult – or so I find – and I am sure that I have left some things vexatiously dark and obscure. I have

⁷ For that I may refer to Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes, *The Modes of Scepticism* (Cambridge, 1985).

Introduction

sometimes set out arguments in a modestly formal manner. In a very few places I have used a few of the logical symbols which pepper modern philosophical writings. I do not see why symbols, once explained, should deter. But numerous readers are allegedly unsettled by them, and whenever I have used them I have also given a paraphrase in ordinary language.

The five chapters of the book derive from five lectures which I gave in Naples in April 1988. The written text does not present exactly what I said; but it remains the text of a set of lectures, and it retains some of the looseness and informality which lecturers are customarily allowed.

I have added a few footnotes. (Many of them are simply lists of references, which look ugly if set out in the text.) It is easy enough to log the bottom of a page with annotations; but more often than not such stuff rather displays the author's learning than forwards the reader's understanding. At any rate, that is my current excuse for idleness.

Again, the book contains no bibliography and few bibliographical references. There are several excellent bibliographies of Pyrrhonism in print,⁸ and there is no need to publish another. As for references, I have used them for one purpose only, viz. to direct the reader to discussions of matters which are not dealt with in my own text. (Even here I have been selective, and in particular, I have not thought it appropriate to give running references to the vast modern literature in the theory of knowledge.⁹) Lest this practice

⁸ There is an introductory bibliography on Pyrrhonism in Annas and Barnes, *op. cit.* n.7; and a full one by Luciana Ferraria and Giuseppina Santese, in Gabriele Giannantoni (ed.), *Lo scetticismo antico* (Naples, 1981). For an excellent bibliographical introduction to Hellenistic philosophy in general see volume 2 of A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1987). The bibliographical record published each year in the journal *Elenchos* will keep the brazen-bowelled up to date.

⁹ Of the modern literature I think I have gained most from P.F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism – some Varieties* (London, 1985); Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Cambridge Mass, 1985); Alvin I. Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge Mass, 1986); John Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (London, 1986); and from the articles collected by G.S. Pappas and Marshall Swain, *Essays on Knowledge and Justification* (Ithaca NY, 1978), and by Hilary Kornblith, *Naturalizing Epistemology* (Cambridge Mass, 1985). There is a helpful recent survey by Ernest Sosa, 'Beyond Scepticism, to the Best of our Knowledge', *Mind* 97, 1988, 153–88.

Introduction

seem intolerably immodest, I should perhaps say – what will be evident to any professional who may chance upon this book – that I do indeed owe a very great deal to earlier philosophers and scholars. Like all other students of Pyrrhonism, I have, for example, learned much from Victor Brochard's *Les sceptiques grecs*. If I do not write 'cf. Brochard' at the foot of every fifth page, that does not mean that I am not indebted to Brochard at least so often.

The five lectures were given at the invitation of the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici. I am deeply grateful to the President of the Institute, Avvocato Gerardo Marotta, and to its Director, Professor Giovanni Pugliese Carratelli, for inviting me to speak on scepticism in the elegant and learned surroundings of the Palazzo Serra di Cassano. I am grateful, too, to the Secretary General of the Institute, Professor Antonio Gargano, for his generous and unobtrusive aid.

I thank my Naples audiences for the helpful comments and criticisms which they offered, and also for the courtesy and patience with which they suffered my vile Italian.

Earlier versions of some of the lectures were delivered as papers to various groups and gatherings: at the Universities of Göttingen, Oxford, Zürich, Bern, York, Alberta, Princeton, Budapest and Pecs, and at the London School of Economics. On each of these occasions I suspect that I learned more from my audience than they learned from me.

The final typescript was scrutinized by two referees for the Cambridge University Press. Their anonymous remarks enabled me to make a number of substantial improvements to the text.

Over the years I have accumulated more debts to friends and colleagues than I can readily recall. Several of the ideas which I here put forward as my own were certainly suggested, implicitly or explicitly, by others. I hope that the true begetters will be content with a general expression of gratitude – and more flattered than vexed if I have ploughed with their heifers. I cannot name them all individually, and to select some would be invidious.

Sextus once had the status of an influential thinker, and he was once read as an important philosopher. I do not think that he was a great philosopher, of the rank of an Aristotle or a Chrysippus or a

Cambridge University Press
0521383390 - The Toils of Scepticism
Jonathan Barnes
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

Introduction

Galen. But I do think that his works contain a quantity of good philosophy. His reputation is now once more on the rise. If this book helps to persuade one or two readers to look seriously at Sextus and at ancient Pyrrhonism, it will have achieved all it can decently hope for.

Oxford
June 1989

JONATHAN BARNES