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Scepticism as a Kind of Philosophy

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Scepticism has been one of the standard problems of epistemology in modern times. It takes various forms – the most general one being the thesis that knowledge is impossible; but equally prominent are such versions as the notorious doubt about the existence of an external world, inaugurated by Descartes' *Meditations*, or doubts about the existence of objective values. Philosophers who undertake to refute scepticism – still a very popular exercise – try to show that knowledge is possible after all, or to prove the existence of an external world, and so on. Sceptics, generally speaking, are seen as radical doubters – philosophers who call into question assumptions that are usually taken for granted by ordinary people as well as by other philosophers. Those doubts have to be refuted by showing that they are in some way unjustified.

It was not always so. In ancient times, when the label Scepticism was introduced together with a variety of others, Sceptics were seen primarily as philosophers who suspend judgment, refrain from making any assertions, either about philosophical problems or about anything whatsoever, including everyday statements of fact. The word "sceptic" literally means "investigator" or "searcher", not "doubter". Here, to illustrate the point, is the opening chapter of Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, entitled "The most fundamental difference among philosophies":

> When people are investigating any subject, the likely result is either a discovery, or a denial of discovery and a confession of inapprehensibility, or else a continuation of the investigation. This, no doubt, is why in the case of philosophical investigations, too, some have said that they have discovered the truth, some have asserted that it cannot be apprehended, and others are still investigating. Those who are called Dogmatists in the proper sense of the word think that they have discovered the truth – for example, the schools of Aristotle and Epicurus and the Stoics, and some others. The schools of Clitomachus and Carneades, and other Academics, have asserted that things cannot be apprehended. And the Sceptics are still investigating. Hence the most fundamental kinds of philosophy are reasonably thought to be three: the Dogmatic, the Academic, and the Sceptical. (PH 1.1–4)[1]

[1] tr. J. Annas & J. Barnes in: Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, Cambridge U. P. 1994. I use this translation for passages from PH unless otherwise indicated.

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Sextus presents scepticism as a kind of philosophy, distinguished from others not by the content of its doctrines (there are none), but apparently by its attitude to philosophical problems and theses. Modern so-called sceptics would fall into Sextus' second category – negative dogmatists, people who argue for the view that knowledge is impossible on the basis of specific assumptions about what knowledge would have to be. A Pyrrhonist Sceptic would suspend judgment about the premises of such arguments as much as about their conclusions, and hence not assert that knowledge is impossible, or that we do not know whether there is an external world, and so on. In this paper I propose to take at look at Sextus' claim that Scepticism is not a doctrine at all, but rather a different kind of philosophy.

Sextus' tripartition is probably an expansion of a simpler twofold division that can be found in Diogenes Laertius (1.16): "Of the philosophers some were dogmatists, others ephectics [suspenders of judgment]". Diogenes' classification contrasts philosophers who have doctrines with others who suspend judgment; but his subsequent explication of the two labels already begins to look like the modern contrast between philosophers who believe they can find the truth and sceptics who say one cannot: "dogmatists are those who make assertions about things as being apprehended; ephectics are those who suspend judgment about things *as being inapprehensible*" – that is, they maintain that things cannot be known. Sextus' version is more sophisticated. He (rightly) treats the view that nothing can be known as a philosophical doctrine, and hence puts the Academics on the side of dogmatism as opposed to his own school, which professes to be simply continuing the search. Now if Sceptics are investigators who have no answers to propose, in what sense do they count as philosophers?

Sextus' answer should be contained in the general account of Pyrrhonism he offers in the first book of his *Outlines*. It will emerge, I think, that "perpetual investigator" is actually not a very apt description of a Pyrrhonist – but, as I shall argue later, an accurate description of the Pyrrhonists' ancient rivals, the Academics (precisely those philosophers whom Sextus stigmatizes as negative dogmatists). But let us look first at Pyrrhonism.

Sextus' books were written toward the end of a long tradition of non-dogmatic philosophy, going back at least to the end of the 4th century BC, the lifetime of the founder and figurehead Pyrrho of Elis. The historical development of what we now call Greek Scepticism is obscure, owing to the fact that virtually everything that was written before Sextus has been lost; but one can at least say that Sextus' version of Pyrrhonism does not represent a uniform view that was preserved through the centu-

ries. Apart from Pyrrho himself, who may have had many admirers during his lifetime, but apparently did not have many disciples (apart from the notorious Timon[2]), we should include the "sceptical" period of Plato's Academy as well, at least from Arcesilaus in the 3rd century down to Carneades (2nd cent. BC), because Aenesidemus, the reviver of the Pyrrhonist sect in the 1st cent. BC, seems to have been an Academic who left his school to found a rival enterprise, apparently because he found the Academics of his own time insufficiently sceptical.[3] Another influence, documented by the – no doubt fictitious – 'genealogy' of the Sceptical school from Timon to Sextus' pupil Saturninus in DL (9.115–116) which contains the names of several distinguished physicians, is that of the Empiricist school of medicine. The famous Empiricist doctor Heraclides actually appears on DL's list as the immediate predecessor of Aenesidemus. The medical Empiricists from the 3rd century BC on had an ongoing debate with the so-called Rationalists (λογικοί), doctors who believed that one should try to understand and treat diseases by discovering their (often unobservable) causes. Our main source for the disputes among the physicians is Galen, who treats the Empiricists as (philosophical) Sceptics; as the surname "Empiricus" shows, Sextus himself must have been a member of this school, and we know that he actually wrote a book on Empirical medicine (see M 1.61) which has unfortunately been lost.

The form of Sextus' exposition is obviously influenced by the style of the philosophical historiographers and commentators of his own time: he follows the pattern that would be used for the account of a school that had doctrines in the three traditional 'parts' of philosophy, physics, logic and ethics. So we get first some notes on the name of the school and its origins, including the question whether Pyrrhonism can count as a school or sect (αἵρεσις) at all – to which the answer is a guarded yes (PH 1.16–17). Then Sextus appears to summarize the position of his school in the three traditional fields (ch.s 9, 11, 12). He has nothing to offer under physics. In the brief chapter entitled "Do Sceptics study natural science?" (PH 1.18) he candidly admits that Sceptics engage in the discussion of questions from this field only for the purpose of exhibiting undecidable conflicts of opinion in order to reach or perhaps preserve their peace of mind. He adds that they deal with logic and ethics in the same way. But as a matter of fact, he does have things to say under the rubrics "The criterion of Scepticism"

[2] Timon of Phlius (approx. 325–230 BC), best known for his satirical attacks on other philosophers, is probably the ultimate source of all the surviving evidence about Pyrrho, since Pyrrho himself, as one might expect, wrote nothing.

[3] This has recently been doubted by Fernanda Decleva Caizzi ("Aenesidemus and the Academy", *Classical Quarterly* 1992, 176–189), but see the reply by J. Mansfeld, "Aenesidemus and the Academics", in: L. Ayres (ed), *The Passionate Intellect*, Rutgers University Studies in Classical Humanities vii, New Brunswick/London 1995, 235–248.

(21−24) and "What is the end of Scepticism?" (25−30), topics that would normally be considered to belong to epistemology ("logic") and ethics, respectively. Of course the Sceptics do not have a philosophical view about either the criterion of truth or the ultimate goal of life, but it turns out that they do use (if not argue for) what they call a criterion for *action*, and they also have an ultimate aim, namely tranquillity, which they claim to achieve by practising their philosophical method. It looks as though the Pyrrhonists had at least a quasi-system.

But in lieu of the more detailed exposition of doctrines that would have followed such a summary in the account of a dogmatic school, we get the extended presentation of the famous Modes − a large collection of materials to be used in setting up conflicts of opinions about all sorts of subjects, followed by an ingenious set of epistemological meta-arguments, the Modes of Agrippa, designed to thwart any attempt by dogmatically inclined philosophers to resolve the controversies that surround philosophical as well as everyday questions. After that, we get a highly scholastic series of short chapters about the slogans or utterances (φωναί) through which the Sceptics expressed their attitude or, as they might prefer to say, the affection (πάθος) that results from the exercise of their argumentative skills. Here Sextus describes a variety of ways in which these utterances can be seen not to be assertions of any sort − for that, of course, would count as dogmatism. This section is a good illustration of the multiple strands of tradition behind Sextus' account of Scepticism. Some of the slogans, such as οὐ μᾶλλον, ("no more this than that") go back beyond Pyrrho to Democritus and Plato; others are attempts to avoid even the appearance of assertion by using e. g. the form of a question; but there are also phrases like "I have no apprehension" (ἀκαταληπτῶ) and even "Everything is inapprehensible" that derive from the Stoic-Academic debate about the possibility of knowledge. Finally, there are six chapters in which Sextus endeavours to refute the claim, presumably made by other philosophers, that Pyrrhonism is identical with some other school, notably the Academic and medical Empiricism.

What are we to make of this portrait of a self-proclaimed group of philosophers-without-answers? In ch. 8, Sextus had told us that while the Sceptics do not have a school or sect in the standard sense of being adherents of some system of philosophical doctrines that contains assertions about obscure matters, they do belong to a school if by that word one understands "a way of life (ἀγωγή)[4] which, to all appear-

[4] Annas/Barnes translate this word as "persuasion", which I find misleading, especially for readers without Greek, who would naturally take it as translating a

ances, coheres with some account (λόγος), the account suggesting how it is possible to live correctly (where 'correctly' is taken not only with reference to virtue, but more loosely, and extends to the ability to suspend judgment)" … "For (he continues) we coherently follow, to all appearances, an account which shows us (or "suggests", ὑποδεικνύει) a life in conformity with traditional customs and the law and ways of life and our own feelings." I take it that all of book I, and not just the brief chapter about the criterion for action, can be seen as a version of this account – or story, as I might be inclined to translate here, to distinguish it from either a doctrine or an argument. The story begins, I think, in ch. 6, with the "principles" of Scepticism. According to this chapter, the initial motivation of the Pyrrhonist is the hope of reaching tranquillity, to free himself from the disturbances that befall a person who observes "the general disorder of things". "Men of noble character", faced with ubiquitous conflicts of perceptual appearances as well as opinions or doctrines, feel impelled to investigate what is true and what is false. What leads the Sceptic into philosophical investigations is disturbance and confusion; but he engages in the search for truth not just in order to find answers to puzzling questions, but in order to attain peace of mind. Contrast this picture with Plato's and Aristotle's description of the philosopher as someone who starts out from bewilderment, indeed, but then desires to find the truth for its own sake. It is true, of course, that the Hellenistic schools advertised their doctrines, and hence the study of philosophy, as a way of reaching happiness as well, and Epicurus is even reported to have said that the study of nature would be useless if it did not lead to tranquillity. But this was precisely because philosophy was taken to be a way of finding the truth. The conception of philosophy as a search for truth was also used in the first chapter of the *Outlines* quoted above; but here we are told that a Pyrrhonist philosopher is interested in finding the truth only as a way of reaching peace of mind. This is why, when he finds himself unable to discover the truth, but nevertheless relieved of his worries once he has given up on the project, the Sceptic also loses interest in

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word like πίστις. I use "way of life" for lack of a better term. As Roberta Ioli has shown (in: *'Αγωγή and related terms in Sextus Empiricus*, MPhil thesis, Cambridge 1999), the use of the word in a philosophical context and in contrast to αἵρεσις suggests following a lead – either a person or a set of instructions. So in its second occurrence here (1.23) it seems to correspond to the phrase διδασκαλία τεχνῶν (teaching of kinds of expertise) in the description of the "everyday observances" followed by the Sceptics (PH 1.24). For "way of life", see the explication of the word by Sextus at PH 1.145.

the investigation of philosophical problems. Scepticism itself, indeed, was defined accordingly in ch. 4, as "an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment and afterwards to tranquillity" (PH 1.8). The Sceptic's subsequent investigations are undertaken in order to exhibit the equal strength of arguments on both sides of each conflict, which will lead the investigator to suspend judgment; and suspension of judgment is supposed to lead to tranquillity. Sextus explains how this allegedly happens in his chapter about the goal of Scepticism, PH 1.25−30, by telling an anecdote:

> What is said to have happened to the painter Apelles befalls the Sceptic too. They say that Apelles was painting a horse and wanted to represent the foam at the horse's muzzle. He was so unsuccessful that he gave up and hurled at the picture the sponge he used to wipe the paints off his brush. The sponge touched the picture and produced a representation of the foam.

So for the Sceptic, tranquillity follows unexpectedly, not upon the discovery of truth, but upon giving up the search. The Sceptic finds himself unable to decide between conflicting appearances or opinions and suspends judgment − and then notices, to his surprise, that his previous worries have left him together with the attempt to arrive at a decision. This is clearly not a philosophical theory about the goal of life, but it is a story about the aim of the Sceptical philosopher as a person, and an explanation of his way of life. If we take this as a part of the story mentioned in ch. 8, it tells us that a Pyrrhonist will use his skill to construct a situation of equipollence whenever he encounters a conflict of doctrines or appearances, which will then lead him to abandon the project of finding answers, and consequently be no longer troubled by the problem.

But we were also told that the Sceptical story suggests a way of living correctly − and that is the point taken up in the chapter about the Sceptical criterion. It contains the Pyrrhonists' answer to the charge, brought against those who claim to suspend judgment on all matters at least since the time of Pyrrho, that a person who refrains from making any judgments at all will be unable to act, since action implies a decision or belief about whether things are one way rather than another.[5] Obviously, the Sceptic cannot base any judgments or

[5] I have discussed some sceptical replies to this argument in "Sceptical Strategies" (in: M. Schofield et al., *Doubt and Dogmatism*, Oxford 1980, 54−83).

decisions on a principled method of establishing the truth or making moral decisions. Having given up the attempt to find guidance in reason and argument, he might be at a loss as to how to conduct his life – or indeed, as the dogmatist opponents claimed, unable to act at all. But this, as Sextus points out, is not the case, for instead of reason-based judgments the Sceptic will make use of appearances – he will respond to the way things appear to him, act as his instincts such as hunger or thirst impel him to act, without thinking that he is right about any view with which another person might disagree.

I will not go into the vexed question whether the Pyrrhonists' "appearances" are to count as some kind of beliefs or not. It seems to me that the debate about this question[6] has suffered to some extent from a failure to distinguish between different senses of "belief". It may be taken in the strong sense of "judgment", meaning assent to a proposition justified by appropriate reasons one is prepared to produce in order to defend the truth of one's assertion; but it can also be used in a much weaker, dispositional sense, according to which it is sufficient for the ascription of a belief to an agent if she acts or behaves in a certain way. If I avoid an approaching car, for example, I thereby show that I believe that there is a dangerous heavy object coming towards me that might kill me if I do not get out of the way. I could no doubt offer reasons, both for the belief and for the action, but I probably did not think of them. In fact my dog might have reacted in exactly the same way, though it cannot offer reasons to justify its 'belief'. I would say that the Pyrrhonist conception of "following appearances" is on the model of this kind of behaviour, and it is a matter of terminological choice whether we want to speak of belief here or not.

Appearances and natural urges arise passively and involuntarily (PH 1.22) and hence are not based on judgments as to what is or is not the case, ought or ought not to be done; but they are sufficient to keep the Sceptic going, as it were. A simple version of this reply to the dogmatic objection may go back to Pyrrho himself and was later elaborated in the sceptical Academy. But while earlier answers addressed only the question how a Sceptic can orient himself in a particular situation, Sextus' version purports to show that we can make do with appearances in every aspect of ordinary life. Following appearances or, as he calls it, "everyday observances" (βιωτικὴ τήρησις, Ph 1.23) has four parts: first, "guidance by nature", which provides the Sceptic with sense-impressions and thoughts[7]; second, "necessitation of feelings",

[6] For the debate see e. g. the essays by M. F. Burnyeat, M. Frede, and J. Barnes reprinted in: M. F. Burnyeat/M. Frede, *The Original Sceptics*, Hackett, Indianapolis 1997.

[7] The Greek text is: ὑφηγήσει μὲν φυσικῇ καθ' ἣν φυσικῶς αἰσθητικοὶ καὶ νοητικοί ἐσμεν. M. Frede ("The Empiricist Attitude towards Reason and Theory", in: *Apeiron* xxi, 1988, p. 95) finds in this passage a recognition of reason as a natural

such as hunger and thirst, which will lead the Sceptic to go for food and drink; third, the "handing down of laws and customs", which leads the Sceptics to accept, for example, piety as good "in an everyday fashion", and impiety as bad; and fourth, "teaching of kinds of expertise", which will permit the Sceptic to practice the crafts in which he has been trained. So Sextus can claim that the Sceptic will lead a perfectly ordinary life, including conformity to the moral views of his community, and that he will even be able to make a living as a practitioner of some craft by following the instructions of his teachers. None of this, or so we are invited to believe, requires any reasoned decision about the truth or falsity of potentially controversial views, and hence the Sceptic never needs to be disturbed. But in case he should find himself tempted to enter a dispute, he will presumably use his Sceptical technique of argument to rid himself of the desire to find out how things really are.

Such, in outline, is the account that guides the Sceptic's way of life – one that coheres remarkably well with the anti-rationalism of the Empirical doctors, though avoiding, at least in Sextus' book, their dogmatic assertion that nothing can be known about things non-evident (PH 1.236). There is however a complication in Sextus' case, arising from his frequent use of the Modes of Agrippa (PH 1.164–177). This set of argument-forms is no doubt an effective device to stop people from trying to solve puzzles by justifying some particular view about how things really are, but it is not a method for reaching equipollence as advertised in the definition of Scepticism. It is in fact a piece of negative dogmatism designed to convince dogmatists that no judgment can ever be sufficiently justified to count as an instance of knowledge.

And *pace* Jonathan Barnes[8] it seems to me to be just as questionable as the older Academic argument for the impossibility of knowledge against the Stoics. Briefly, the dubious assumptions here are 1) that no judgment can be accepted as a piece of knowledge without the backing of reasons; and 2) that every judgment can be disputed. The argument overlooks the vast number of facts we claim to know unhesitatingly without having the faintest idea of how we would defend or justify them if challenged, and without consciously relying on any reasons. Examples would be not only everyday perceptual beliefs, but also such things as knowing who our parents

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human capacity, but I think one should be careful not to conclude that this means reasoning. The word νοητικοί should probably be taken only in the minimal sense of being able to think and understand language, as e. g. in PH 2.10, where Sextus seems to refer back to this passage. There can be no question, of course, that the Pyrrhonists made use of reasoning in their arguments against other philosophers, but I think they kept it out of their sceptical way of living.

[8] *The Toils of Scepticism*, Cambridge U. P. 1990.

are, in what city we are living, etc. and generalities such as that cats are animals, books are made for reading, and humans are language-users. The first sort can occasionally be called into question when there is reason to suspect delusion or trickery, but the default-option, as it were, is truth. To say that we are never justified in making even such modest claims is to introduce the method of Unreasonable ("hyperbolic") Doubt made famous by Descartes, and I see no reason to follow Descartes on this point. Aristotle was right, I think, to say that if there is to be knowledge, some truths must be known without proof. Since he was interested in scientific knowledge, not justification of knowledge-claims in general, he then went on to consider the first principles of demonstration, rather than humdrum bits of everyday knowledge (the knowledge we need to have in order to follow any kind of systematic instruction: *An. Po.* A1, 71a1−2). But his move, though never intended as a Refutation of Scepticism, seems to me to be the right response to the later sceptics as well. A Refutation of Scepticism is no doubt a hopeless enterprise once we accept the sceptic's premises, but why should we not consider his argument as a *reductio ad absurdum* of its premises?

Sextus' fondness for this technique is understandable if one considers that the old set of ten Modes contains quite a few weak items and so is not likely to convince a dogmatist that no question is ever decidable. Sextus may be using Agrippa's arguments only *ad hominem*, assuming that the dogmatist will agree with their premises, but to the extent that he seems to think they will have no escape, his practice threatens to undermine the claim that the Pyrrhonist will lead a life without dogmatic assent.

Now since Sextus' definition of Scepticism appeals to equipollence, and Agrippa's Modes must have been introduced after Aenesidemus[9], let me set this question aside for the moment and consider only the official account of the Sceptical way of life. Is it also a kind of philosophy? Yes and no, I think. If by philosophy we mean a search for truth, successful or otherwise, the Sceptical way of life can hardly qualify. Contrary to Sextus' initial claim that the Sceptic goes on investigating, philosophical investigations seem to be precisely what the Sceptic's way of life is designed to avoid. The impressive apparatus of the Sceptical modes is supposed to be used for one purpose only − namely to rid us of the foolish attachment to settling questions by reason and argument.

[9] Nothing is known about Agrippa, and the only source that ascribes the Five Modes to him is DL (9.88). F. Caujolle-Zaslawsky (*Dictionnaire des philosophes antiques*, ed R. Goulet, Paris 1989, vol I, 71) suggests that Agrippa might in fact have been simply a character in a book by the Sceptic Apellas (see DL 9.106), a man about whom we also do not know anything else. Still, both Sextus and Diogenes say that the Five Modes were introduced later than Aenesidemus' Ten Modes.

Or, as one might put it to bring out the paradoxical nature of the Pyrrhonist enterprise, reasoning and argument are used only to undermine themselves. But this vehement anti-rationalism seems to be based upon a rationale itself – the Sceptics' claim that no controversies will ever be settled; that abandoning the search for truth will give you peace of mind; and that there is no need to fall back on reason and argument in everyday life because all of it can be conducted by following the appearances that come to us involuntarily, untainted by the influence of reason. One might be tempted to call this set of claims a philosophical theory, however rudimentary – but in fairness to the Sceptics, one has to recognize that Sextus takes great care to make sure that it is not mistaken for one. No part of the set is presented as the conclusion of an argument. Sextus carefully qualifies the claim that the attempt at settling a dispute always ends in a stalemate by saying that it refers only to the cases investigated by the Sceptic so far. The full formulation of the Sceptical slogan "there is an equally strong argument opposed to every argument"[10] would have to run as follows: "To every argument I have scrutinized which purports to establish something in dogmatic fashion, there appears to me to be opposed another argument, purporting to establish something in dogmatic fashion, equal to it in convincingness or lack of convincingness" (PH 1.203). And to make sure that even this very cautious formulation not be taken as an assertion, Sextus will insist that any utterance by a Sceptic should only be seen as an expression of the way he is affected. The claim that tranquillity follows upon suspension of judgment is presented in the form of a biographical anecdote – no promise is made that the experience can easily be repeated, or that tranquillity necessarily must follow suspension (although I must say that the phrase "as a shadow follows a body", used by both Sextus (PH 1.29) and DL (9.107), sounds a little suspicious). The "everyday observances" that Sextus offers as guidance for the Sceptic's way of life are a set of replies to dogmatic claims that this or that activity might require reasoned judgment and deliberation. Sextus points out, in each case, that no reasoning is needed to perform in (allegedly) normal ways; he does not try to defend the view that it is right or reasonable to follow appearances.

Hence a Pyrrhonist would probably not be impressed if one objected to him that his overall story is neither very plausible nor very appeal-

[10] Here I prefer the translation "argument" for λόγος to Annas/Barnes' "account", because the slogan was after all not invented by the Sceptics – it goes back, minus the significant word ἴσος (equal), to the sophist Protagoras.

ing. For example, a dogmatist would be likely to object that several of the Ten Modes seem to present only apparent conflicts. To take a simple example: if A likes apples and B does not, this need not (and usually does not) lead to a dispute as to whether apples are good-tasting or not; having a good taste is not a property of apples taken by themselves, but only of apples as tasted by people. Again, if eating apples is healthy for humans but unhealthy for cats, this is no reason for dispute, because these facts are relational – but they seem to be pretty well established facts. So the Sceptic's claim that things in general are full of conflicting appearances seems to be vastly exaggerated, making his remedy for getting rid of these conflicts seem less urgently needed. But even if we consider only genuine controversies such as those among dogmatic philosophers, it seems to be false to say that no dispute can ever be resolved, since some views at least are generally agreed to be mistaken. Obviously, dogmatists would (and did) also object to Sextus' claim that dogmatic belief about real goods or evils will inevitably lead to insufferable troubles. And finally, why should one believe that giving up the search for answers will lead to tranquillity rather than to profound gloom?

But Sextus, as I said, does not purport to rely on argument to convert others to Pyrrhonism. He is not in the business of arguing that everybody should, let alone ought to become a Pyrrhonist. His comments on the Sceptical slogans describe them as being like a purgative that removes itself from the body along with the bad humours (PH 1.206).[11] This *is*, I think, an apt description of Sextus' arguments, for taken as a philosophical theory Pyrrhonism is self-defeating – an argument to show that arguments are useless.

The Pyrrhonist story thus has a tenuous status, being presented as nothing more than an expression of the Sceptic's – possibly temporary – state of mind. But then one should admit that, in Sextus' version at

[11] For this description as a parody of the dogmatists' model of philosophy as a therapy of the soul, see A. J. Voelke, "Soigner par le *logos*: la thérapeutique de Sextus Empiricus", in: "Le Scepticisme Antique", *Cahiers de la revue de théologie et de philosophie* 15, 1990, especially pp. 192–194. He quotes the following comment by Plutarch: οὐ γὰρ ὡς ἑλλέβορον, οἶμαι, δεῖ θεραπεύσαντα συνεκφέρειν (συνεκφέρεσθαι Pohlenz) τῷ νοσήματι τὸν λόγον, αλλ' ἐμμένοντα τῇ ψυχῇ συνέχειν τὰς κρίσεις καὶ φυλάσσειν. φαρμάκοις γὰρ οὐκ ἔοικεν ἀλλὰ σιτίοις ὑγιεινοῖς ἡ δύναμις αὐτοῦ … (de cohib. ira 453 D–E): "For I do not think that reason should be used in one's cure as we use hellebore, and be washed out of the body together with the disease, but it must remain in the soul and keep watch and ward over the judgments. For the power of reason is not like drugs, but like some wholesome food ..." tr. W. C. Helmbold).

any rate, the story is presented with great vigour and vivacity. Going through an interminable array of arguments that appear to leave one stymied again and again may well have the intended or promised effect of making the reader think that the dogmatists' enterprise is doomed to failure. And if you happened to be an anti-rationalist (who recognizes, as Sextus explicitly does, that Empiricism is just another theory, PH 1.236) – what else could you do to get your message across?

So much for Sextus' version of the Pyrrhonist account. If this is what was meant by Scepticism as a kind of philosophy, then it is a philosophy in a peculiar sense – a discipline that uses argument and reasoning not as a method to discover the truth, but only as a therapeutic device to deter people from trying to be guided by reason. But why would anyone wish to describe this as a continuation of the ordinary philosopher's search for truth? I do not know, of course, whether the anti-rationalism of the *Outlines* was characteristic of the entire Pyrrhonist movement from Aenesidemus on – though it fits in rather well with Photius' summary of Aenesidemus' books, and with the set of Modes against causal explanations ascribed to him at PH 1.180–185. But it certainly was not a part of the Pyrrhonists' *Academic* inheritance – and I suspect, indeed, that the label ζητητικός (inquirer) was taken over from the Academy. It is well known that Sextus' description of the Academics as negative dogmatists is not entirely fair, at least as far as the sceptical Academy from Arcesilaus to Carneades was concerned.[12] Cicero repeatedly tells us in his *Academica* that neither Arcesilaus nor Carneades wished to claim that they knew that nothing could be known, nor even that they themselves knew nothing, as Socrates allegedly did (Ac. I 45). But the same Cicero also informs us that in the generation after Carneades there were philosophers in the Academy who did accept the conclusion of the celebrated anti-Stoic argument to the effect that nothing can be known (ἀκαταληψία), and proposed to make do with plausible opinion rather than knowledge. These were presumably Aenesidemus' contemporaries, and if Aenesidemus himself was an anti-rationalist, it is easy to see why he would have been dissatisfied with their position. For the appeal to greater or lesser plausibility of impressions, accompanied by a set of rules for the confirmation or

[12] For this point see my earlier paper "Über den Unterschied zwischen den Pyrrhoneern und den Akademikern", *Phronesis* 26, 1981, 153–171 (English transl. in G. Striker, *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics*, Cambridge 1996). At that time, however, I did not sufficiently appreciate the importance of Pyrrhonist anti-rationalism.

testing of candidate impressions, would of course reinstate the enterprise of trying to get somewhere near the truth by finding good reasons for one's beliefs. From the point of view of an enemy of reason, it would hardly make a difference whether your claims were modest or arrogant, claiming just a reasonable degree of plausibility or claiming certainty. Sextus makes this point in his chapter about the difference between his own school and the Academy. But there he also recognizes that not all Academics took this line. He exempts Arcesilaus – who, as one realizes at this point, had not been mentioned in the introductory chapter – from the charge of dogmatism and goes so far as to say that

> his way of life (ἀγωγή) is virtually the same as ours. For he is not found making assertions about the reality or unreality of anything, nor does he prefer one thing to another in point of convincingness or lack of convincingness, but he suspends judgment about everything. And he says that the aim is suspension of judgment, which, we said, is accompanied by tranquillity. He also says that particular suspensions of judgment are good and particular assents bad. (PH 1.232–233)

The first sentence distinguishes Arcesilaus from Carneades and later Academics who treated the convincingness or otherwise of impressions as a criterion for action. This theory was invented by Carneades, who offered it as a reply to the argument that it is impossible to act without belief, though not as his own serious proposal for the conduct of life or for philosophical investigations. Arcesilaus, as we hear from Plutarch (adv. Col. 1122A–F), had given a different reply: he suggested that assent, and hence judgment, was not necessary for action, since people could act by simply responding to sense-impressions and corresponding impulses in the way that, according to the Stoics themselves, other animals do. This is indeed very similar at least to the first part of the "Sceptical criterion". But Sextus does not here mention what he reports elsewhere (M 7.158), namely that in another context Arcesilaus also offered a different "criterion": that the wise man, in the absence of cognitive impressions, i.e. knowledge, may regulate his actions by appeal to "the reasonable" (τὸ εὔλογον). This omission is no doubt significant, for it shows that Arcesilaus could on other occasions admit the appeal to reason that the Pyrrhonists so strenuously avoided. Sextus, it seems, is trying to paint Arcesilaus as a predecessor of his own anti-rationalist stance.[13]

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[13] Mansfeld ("Aenesidemus …", n. 2 above) makes the intriguing suggestion that this attempt to turn Arcesilaus into a Pyrrhonist might actually go back to Aenesidemus, who might have tried to win over some fellow Academics to his new school.

The second sentence is a little puzzling, since it appears to ascribe to Arcesilaus a view about the aim of life (τέλος) that he is not likely to have held. But the remark that suspension of judgment is accompanied by tranquillity is of course Sextus' own addition, and it seems more likely that Arcesilaus might have said that suspension of judgment was the aim of *philosophical discussion*, which would also explain why he approved of particular acts of suspension, and disapproved of particular acts of assent. This would not mean that he saw suspension of judgment as a means to attain happiness or tranquillity, but that he considered it as the appropriate attitude for a philosopher. Cicero tells us that both Arcesilaus and Carneades invested a lot of effort into keeping their interlocutors and students from rash assent. He even describes Carneades as performing a "Herculean labour" (Luc. 108), given the human propensity to go down the slippery slope of assenting to one impression after another. We are also told that the Academics used to hold back with their own views in a debate in order to avoid the undue influence of a teacher's authority on their students (Luc. 60). What seems to lie behind these efforts is not the hope for tranquillity, but rather an appeal to intellectual honesty or the norms of rational inquiry – not to make a firm assertion unless you are sure that it is sufficiently justified, and to avoid error as far as possible. This appeal to intellectual honesty and avoidance of rashness was a part of the Academics' Socratic and Platonic heritage, and it seems clear from Cicero's report that they considered it as a norm of philosophical investigation. They advocated suspension of judgment as a matter of rational caution, not because they regarded it as the inevitable outcome of any controversy, philosophical or otherwise. If they tried to reach a situation of equipollence, this would be an effective way of keeping people from assenting to a philosophical view just because they found it plausible or appealing; but even in the absence of strong counterarguments the Academics would no doubt have recommended suspension of judgment. I take it that Carneades' ingenious critical arguments in many fields of philosophy were designed to show, against the best philosophers of his day, that the questions remained open, however convincing a dogmatic theory like the Stoic might have looked. As far as we can see, the Academics also did not resort to epistemological meta-arguments of the sort of Agrippa's Modes in order to establish the undecidability of controversies quite generally and regardless of subject matter. Of course, Agrippa's Modes were introduced a long time after either Arcesilaus or Carneades, but the argument-forms of these Modes could be found already in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*

(A 3), to which Arcesilaus at least would no doubt have had access. However, Agrippa's Modes are ways of blocking the attempt to resolve a dispute by further investigation, purporting to show that no resolution can ever be reached. The Academics, by contrast, seem to have been interested precisely in keeping investigation going, and the arguments ascribed to Arcesilaus, and particularly to Carneades, always address specific issues, often advancing the discussion by suggesting improvements that their opponents would at times be happy to take over. In short, Academic suspension of judgment seems to have been motivated by philosophical considerations rather than the sheer inability to decide between equally strong arguments for conflicting views. Hence it is not surprising to see that Carneades' reply to the inactivity-argument looks so very different from the Pyrrhonist one. He had no specific objection to the use of reason to arrive at a belief, and so he offered a modest alternative to the Stoic demand for cognitive certainty. Provisional, fallible assent will be enough for everyday life and compatible with suspension of judgment if by judgment one means an assertion that purports to be based on certainty, but we do not need to be content with the involuntary appearances that we find ourselves having apart from any activity of reason.

So the Academics present a rationalist version of Scepticism, and one that can properly be described as a matter of leaving all philosophical questions open and continuing the search for truth. Their advocacy of refraining from judgment would itself be based on argument – and one such argument, ironically, has found its way into Sextus' text:

> … when someone propounds to us an argument we cannot refute, we say to him: 'Before the founder of the school to which you adhere was born, the argument of the school, which is no doubt sound, was not yet apparent, although it was really there in nature. In the same way, it is possible that the argument opposing the one you have just propounded is really there in nature but is not yet apparent to us; so we should not yet assent to what is now thought to be a powerful argument'. (PH 1.33–34)

Sextus presents this as an example of opposing "present to past or future things", but clearly the "future thing" is not yet available. Hence we do not have a situation of equipollence – as Sextus admits, since he begins by saying that the Sceptic cannot refute an argument presented to him. Why then does the Sceptic not acquiesce for the time being, as Sextus himself suggests in a similar passage (M 8.473–475)? If he refuses to give his assent, this is not because he is unable to decide which side is the more convincing. For Sextus, this argument

presumably serves the same purpose as Agrippa's set – it blocks either assent or further investigation and thus preserves the Sceptic's peace of mind. But like Agrippa's Modes, it belies the claim that suspension of judgment comes to him "passively" and is a mere affection. Sextus might no doubt retort that he is using the argument only *ad hominem*, to show his dogmatic opponent that he, the dogmatist, should not take it that he has established anything with certainty. But there is no suggestion in Sextus' text that the Sceptic is inviting his opponent to join him in further investigation, or to go looking for flaws in the proposed argument. Rather, he appears to rely on an inductive argument to show that even the most compelling philosophical theory might one day be overthrown, and to suspend judgment because he wants to avoid rash assent. Hence he seems for once to go against his passive affections and to follow reason.

Whether or not the argument Sextus uses here ultimately goes back to the Academy we cannot tell. But it has always seemed very persuasive to me, and it spells out a plausible general reason for the cautious attitude of the Academics. This is an argument that applies specifically only to judgments based on elaborate theoretical justifications, since it would be preposterous to claim that most of our particular factual beliefs turn out by hindsight to have been mistaken. But as regards philosophical theories, it seems to me that the inductive basis for this argument has grown continually over subsequent centuries of philosophy. Still, I would not wish to say that the attitude of open-minded, perpetual investigation distinguishes the Academic philosophers from their more dogmatically inclined rivals so drastically as to deserve to be called a different kind of philosophy. The division into dogmatists and suspenders of judgment is in the end probably just a polemical move, introduced to highlight a difference in attitude but definitely not in method or subject matter. Few philosophers these days call themselves sceptics, because Scepticism has come to be identified with negative dogmatism. But the attidude adopted by the ancient Academics may actually be more widespread these days than it ever was in antiquity.

In the philosophy department at Harvard hangs a portrait of the psychologist and philosopher William James holding a book with the faint inscription EVER NOT QUITE. Now William James was not a Sceptic, neither in the ancient nor in the modern sense – indeed, one of his most famous essays bears the title "The Will to Believe" (1896). He writes there about religious belief in particular, but among other

arguments he makes a point that would be a significant objection to the attitude of suspending judgment advocated by the Academics. James insists that the injunctions to avoid error and to go on looking for the truth should be kept distinct, and that the search for truth may sometimes require taking the risk of believing something of which one is not, or cannot be certain. So William James was not a Sceptic – but he was, of course, an academic.[14]

[14] Thanks are due to James Allen for reading and commenting on the first draft of this paper. Earlier versions were read at Cornell University and the University of Sheffield. I am grateful for discussion and advice on both occasions, and in particular for Gail Fine's set of written comments.