God (M IX.13-194)

Jonathan Barnes has described one part of Against the Physicists as "rude and mechanical". 1 I would not apply this description to the work as a whole. This is not because I have a higher opinion of the work than Barnes’ wording seems to imply. On the contrary: one of the things that most struck me, in studying the work in preparation for writing this paper, is that it does not fully deserve even the label "mechanical", which suggests at least a certain banal competence in assembling material. Against the Physicists has a number of structural oddities that give parts of it a distinctly haphazard aspect. And one of these parts, as I shall illustrate, is the section that, following the general introduction (M IX.1-12), opens the work, the section on gods. The parallel physical section of Outlines of Pyrrhonism III seems notably better organized.

In the past I have used comparisons of this kind, applied to other parts of Sextus’ oeuvre, as part of an argument for revising what is probably still the standard view on the order of composition of Sextus’ works. The seemingly more polished composition of Outlines of Pyrrhonism (hereafter, PH), I have claimed, is one reason for thinking that it is later than the longer work of which Against the Physicists is part – not earlier, as has usually been thought. The question is of course a very complicated one, and cannot possibly receive a full treatment here. But it is surely not irrelevant to a volume devoted to Against the Physicists. I propose, then, to devote the first section of this paper to a very brief discussion of the issue of order of composition, and, more specifically, to whether anything in Against the Physicists contributes to the case for the ordering that I have proposed elsewhere. In sections II and III, I shall have a good deal to say about the structural oddities to which I referred – especially, though not only, in the section of the text assigned to me – but I will not attempt any explicit inferences about order
of composition. Having discussed these structural matters and also some of the individual arguments in the section on gods, I shall address (in sections IV and V) the question of the nature of Sextus’ own religious practice and its relation to his sceptical activities. In the Appendix I give a complete analytical outline of the section on gods in Against the Physicists.

I

The two books Against the Physicists come between two books Against the Logicians and one book Against the Ethicists; these five books are the surviving portion of a work that Sextus himself calls Σκέπτικα Ὑπομνήματα, Sceptical Treatises (M I.29 [26], II.106, VI.52), 2 which appears to have begun with a general treatment of scepticism, now lost, that would have had covered the same sort of ground as the first, general book of PH. 3 So it looks as if the whole work had the same broad structure as PH, but dealt with its material at far greater length. Now, should we even raise the question which of these two works came first? Why should we assume that he wrote one of them before the other – rather than, say, composing them, and perhaps constantly reworking them, concurrently, rather than sequentially, and perhaps intending them for different audiences? The question is certainly a legitimate one; for we know nothing at all about this subject beyond what can be gleaned from the works themselves.

But the question has a ready answer in the minute studies of Sextus’ style and vocabulary done by the Czech scholar Karel Janácek. Janácek showed a great many subtle differences between the two works in these respects; certain pieces of terminology are more common in one work than the other, one work uses certain connecting words in different ways from the other, and so on. 4 Now these differences are in most cases 5 quite irrelevant to the arguments or ideas being presented; they are simply trivial stylistic preferences or quirks of a kind that many authors exhibit in different phases of their writing life. In this respect they resemble a well-known
stylistic shift in Plato’s writing: a markedly greater tendency to avoid hiatus in six works 
(Sophist, Statesman, Timaeus, Critias, Philebus and Laws) than in all the others. Again, this has nothing to do with any philosophical differences or differences of genre; but in conjunction with other indications that the Laws was Plato’s last work, it gives us good reason to think that these six works are Plato’s latest. In Sextus’ case, too, these mostly insignificant differences point strongly towards different periods of composition of the two works. It is difficult, to put it mildly, to see how they could be explained by the different purposes or intended audiences of the two works, whatever one may take these to be. And in any case, Sextus would have had to be a much more accomplished and self-conscious stylist than he actually is to have exploited these differences in that sort of way. (Sextus’ writing is mostly agreeable, but he is no Plato. And as just noted, not every feature even of Plato’s writing has a significance of this kind.) The obvious conclusion is rather that Sextus’ writing simply underwent these various insignificant shifts, of which he may have been more or less conscious in different instances, and that the two works belong to different portions of Sextus’ working life.

But if the two works were written in different periods, then it becomes worth asking which came first. The arguments that I have used in the past for the priority of the longer work have been of three main kinds. One is the point I have already mentioned (and will return to in the next section): it has again and again been my impression (and I am not alone) that Sextus simply does a better job in PH than in the other work. Other things being equal, one would expect an author’s works, especially on the same subjects, to get better, not worse, over time, and so this would suggest that PH is the later work. Now it is of course true that one has to be careful what one means by “better” in this context; if the purposes of the two works are different, then perhaps different strategies will be effective in each. In particular, on the question of
organization with which I began, it is worth noting that a sceptic might do well not to be too
systematic (that might smack of dogmatism); perhaps a more rambling and discursive treatment
of his material, such as Against the Physicists seems to exhibit as compared with the physical
part of PH III, would work better in inducing the sceptical attitude in some readers. But this line
of thinking can only be taken so far. The announcement of plans that are not followed through
on, or the obfuscating of transitions between topics, are not going to endear Sextus to any likely
category of reader, nor is it plausible that Sextus would have thought that they would; but these
are among the features that, as we shall see, Against the Physicists has in far greater measure
than its counterpart in PH. One can grant that the works may have been written with different
audiences in mind, and that this may account for some of the differences between them, notably
the difference in length (although this is a story that it would be nice to see developed in detail).
But competence and incompetence are not purely relative to audience or purpose, and I shall
suggest that Sextus shows less compositional competence in Against the Physicists than in the
corresponding part of PH, no matter who he expects his readers to be. If Sextus’ writing
followed the usual trajectory, this is turn suggests that the work to which Against the Physicists
belongs is the earlier work.

A second line of argument that I have employed in the past has to do with
correspondences between each of these two works and passages of Diogenes Laertius’ life of
Pyrrho (IX.61-108). I do not think there is any case in Against the Physicists that bears upon this
line of argument, so I have nothing to say about it here. The third and final form of argument
that I have employed in favor of the priority of Σκεπτικό is that it shows much clearer traces of
a form of Pyrrhonism that predates Sextus himself – namely, the Pyrrhonism of Aenesidemus –
than does PH; in PH Sextus has removed most (though not all) such anachronisms, whereas
Skeptika/ retains them to a greater degree. The argument here is complicated, and certainly not without controversy. Here too, Against the Physicists is not particularly revealing. But one point does seem to me to be worth raising in this context.

There is an interesting difference of vocabulary between PH and Skeptika/. Both works make frequent use of the verb ἀναστρέψω, “do away with”. But whereas in PH this verb is never used to describe the sceptic’s own activity, in Skeptika/ Sextus periodically speaks of himself and his sceptical colleagues as “doing away with” the things they have been discussing. Now, ἀναστρέψω in the sense “do away with”, in a philosophical context (unlike some more down-and-dirty contexts in which it is equivalent to “kill”, e.g. Eur. Andr. 518), seems to amount to “argue for the non-existence of”; and in fact the term occurs a number of times in Diogenes Laertius’ summary of Pyrrhonism, where several sections begin “They [i.e. the Pyrrhonists] do away with X” and several sections end “therefore X does not exist”. Diogenes, then, attributes to the Pyrrhonists arguments for the non-existence of the things posited by the dogmatists, such as causes, signs, demonstrations, etc. And it looks as if Sextus in Skeptika/ occasionally does the same thing – even though in PH he takes the trouble to insist that “doing away with” the things about which he argues is precisely what the sceptic, the suspender of judgment, does not do (I.193, 196, 197).

There is room for disagreement about whether Diogenes really means to suggest that the Pyrrhonists endorsed these negative arguments – rather than devising them as part of the construction of sets of equipollent opposing arguments – or whether, if he does mean to suggest this, we should believe him. But there is solid evidence in Sextus himself that at some point such negative argumentation was indeed central to the Pyrrhonist strategy. In Against the Ethicists Sextus not only argues for the conclusion that nothing is by nature good or bad, but
several times (M XI.118, 130, 140) asserts that the Pyrrhonist’s ataraxia results directly from the acceptance of that conclusion (not from suspension of judgement about it). Now this approach might quite accurately be described as “doing away with” the things under discussion; and Diogenes’ account of the Pyrrhonists’ activity, read at face value, would be perfectly compatible with this. The case for connecting this kind of approach with Aenesidemus comes mainly from the summary of his Pyrrhonist Discourses in Photius’ Bibliotheca (169b18-170b35), which attributes to Aenesidemus a number of arguments to the effect that the items posited by the dogmatists do not exist (170b12-14, 17-20, 31-5). And so, if we put all this together, we can see Sextus’ periodic use, in Σκεπτικά, of ἀνατρέπων to describe the sceptic’s own activity not as a simple confusion, but as the result of incomplete adaptation of material from an earlier phase of Pyrrhonism (a version preserved most clearly in his own Against the Ethicists) to the version current in his own time. And if this is correct – admittedly a big “if”, for all that I have said here – then the fact that this happens in Σκεπτικά, but never in PH, is an indication that Σκεπτικά is the earlier work; one would not expect someone to revert to an anachronism, having ironed it out entirely in a previous work.

Against the Physicists contains fewer traces of this pattern than Against the Logicians, but it is not completely free of them. I have found just two instances of ἀνατρέπων in Against the Physicists to refer to the sceptic’s procedure. At the end of his discussion of place, and in transition to the next topic, motion, Sextus says “But since we have done away with (ἀνηρήκαμεν) this [i.e. place] too, let us next see whether …” (M X.36). And earlier, in the course of his discussion of body, he moves to a new, but strictly speaking superfluous, set of arguments by saying “we have already virtually done away with (ἀνηρήκαμεν) body and do not need novel arguments against it” (M IX.366). On the other hand, there are at least two
instances where the sceptics are contrasted with those who “do away with” the topics under discussion (M IX.195, X.48-9); there are the people who posit certain entities, the people who deny their existence, and there are the sceptics who suspend judgement – and ἀνασκεπεῖν is used in connection with the second group. So Sextus is inconsistent in his usage in Against the Physicists. But while his use of ἀνασκεπεῖν in the first person plural may be a relic of an earlier phase of Pyrrhonism, it is the other usage, where it applies to what modern scholars call negative dogmatists, that accords with the Pyrrhonism standard in Sextus himself.

And it is that form of Pyrrhonism that, despite very occasional lapses, is clearly what Sextus intends in Against the Physicists. When he closes a topic, he may sometimes sound as if he is asserting the non-existence of the items just discussed (M IX.439, X.168, 309, 350); and maybe this is what such arguments were designed to do in the hands of Aenesidemus. But Sextus repeatedly makes clear that the point of such negative arguments is instead to serve as a counterweight to the dogmatists’ positive arguments, and that the sceptic’s goal is the manufacturing of a situation of isosthenia, “equal strength”, between the arguments on either side of the issue, leading to suspension of judgement (M IX.59, 137, 191, 192, 194, X.168). It is no accident, I think – and we shall return to this point – that most of these references are from the section on gods; Sextus apparently wants to be particularly clear that he is not in any sense denying the existence of gods. (The stakes are higher for him on this topic than on, say, motion or place.) He also employs the idiosyncratic later Pyrrhonist usage of the term ou mallon, “no more”, to express this sceptical suspension of judgement (M IX.50, 59, 195, X.45, 49).15 Whatever we may say about which work came first, the Pyrrhonism of Against the Physicists is one with which the Sextus of PH would be perfectly comfortable. Whether that Sextus would be
comfortable with the structural oddities of *Against the Physicists* – particularly those in the section on gods – is another question; and to these I now turn.

II

The physical portion of *PH III* announces in the first section that it will begin with a discussion of principles (ἄρχαί). Principles are then divided into material (ὕλικαί) and active (δραστικαί), and each type is discussed, beginning with active principles. The section on active principles – also referred to as “active cause” (δραστικάν οὐ ἐνεργητικάν αἴτιον, 2, 13) – begins with God (2-12) and continues with a more general discussion of cause (13-29). We then move from active to material principles (30), also referred to as elements (στοιχεῖα, 36, 37). A number of views on material principles are listed (31-2), and some Agrippan considerations are introduced to show that any attempt to choose between them is hopeless (33-6). Sextus then says (37) that all these views involve elements that are either bodies or incorporeals, and continues with a critique of both body and the incorporeal (38-55). The whole subject of principles, both active and material, is now declared intractable (ἀπορος, 55), and the topic seems to be at an end; but there follows a brief chapter on blending (κρασίς) which serves as a coda, introducing an additional difficulty about elements (56-62). The discussion now moves to a number of physical topics other than that of principles, including motion and other types of change, rest, place, time and number (63-167). Place and time, of course, were regarded by the Stoics as incorporeals, and it is easy to think of numbers as incorporeal. But time and, with one partial exception, place were not thought of as principles, and nor were numbers, except by the Pythagoreans and those influenced by them. So although the incorporeal in general was dismissed earlier, in the course of the discussion of principles, there is a point to discussing these things separately in the part not dealing with principles.
Against the Physicists proceeds rather differently. The introductory section (M IX.1-12) appears to limit the entire discussion to principles. This is presented as an instance of a general policy of attacking the foundations of a view rather than its particular tenets (1-3); the latter is said to be both a waste of time (something for which the Academics are criticized) and less skilful (τεχνικὸς) and elegant (χαριτικὸς) than the dismantling of an entire view in one attack – an interesting and, for Sextus, unusual appeal to broadly aesthetic considerations. The idea, then, is that if we undermine the principles of physics, we have done all we need as far as physics is concerned. Again we are given the basic division between active and material principles (4), and the proposal to begin with the active ones (ποιητικῶν, 12). But the discussion of the active ones is then previewed as follows: first Sextus will discuss God, and then he will discuss the non-existence of anything active or affected (ποιητικῶν ἦ πάσχον, 12). Already the plan seems to be losing focus; the second part of the treatment of active principles is going to include a treatment of the other type of principles as well.

Moreover, the discussion of God is said to be going to proceed “sort of dogmatically” (ὁδιὸν δογματικῶς), whereas the other topic will be treated “more in the spirit of impasse” (ἀπορητικῶτερον). I must confess that I fail to see what the “dogmatic” aspect of the discussion of God is supposed to consist in, or why Sextus would admit to conducting any inquiry dogmatically (even given the qualification ὁδιὸν, the force of which is also unclear); indeed, since skepsis is the name he gives to his own, non-dogmatic approach, “inquiring (σκέπτομενοι) sort of dogmatically” has the feel of an oxymoron. At any rate Sextus’ treatment of the main topic, whether or not God or gods exist, seems to be a model of the Pyrrhonist method of assembling equally powerful arguments on either side. There is an echo of the same point at the end of the treatment of God, where Sextus proposes to deal “more sceptically”
(Σκεπτικώτερον, 194) with the next topic than he has on the one just finished. But here the “dogmatic” side of the distinction is not sustained. Sextus claims to have established “that suspension of judgement follows from the things said dogmatically about the active principles”, and (with one possible exception noted below) that is an accurate statement of what has just taken place; but that is of course quite different from saying that his own procedure has been in some way dogmatic – the dogmatism here (just as usual) belongs to the views put into suspension of judgement, not to the act of putting them there.²² Perhaps Sextus is drawing on sources some of which he regards, or some of which announced themselves, as more dogmatic than others. But if so, he is (to use the criteria he himself introduced) less skilful and elegant than we might like in adapting them into a coherent and clearly structured account.

This is not the end of such difficulties. I do not want to encroach on others’ territories. But the oddity of the place of the section on God in the whole may be better appreciated by a sense of the structural oddity of the whole; and so a very brief outline of the remainder may be worthwhile. The claim “that suspension of judgement follows from the things said dogmatically about the active principles” (194) makes it sound as if Sextus has already been discussing active principles in general, not just God. Be that as it may, he now moves to a more general treatment of cause. But, as previewed at the outset, this is in fact a treatment of “active cause” and “affected matter” together (ποιοῦντος αίτίου, παραχώσης ὑλῆς, 194). It is a treatment of other things too; subtraction and addition come in by the coat-tails of the question how anything can be affected (277), and whole and part come in by the coat-tails of subtraction and addition (330). These are indeed not unrelated to the general topic of the active and the affected, as Sextus is at pains to point out (330); but in PH III these topics are dealt with separately, in the part following the discussion of principles, and the effect is much more focused and less
rambling. This large section then closes by saying that active principles have now been adequately treated, and that what follows will be a more general discussion of “both these [i.e., presumably, active principles] and material principles” (358), which is puzzling for three reasons: a) much of the previous text, as we just saw, deals with both active and material principles, not just active ones; b) the first part of this remark sounds as if it is announcing the close of the treatment of active principles, while the second part immediately contradicts this; and c) what follows does not in fact deal with active and material principles together, but only with material ones.

Again, as in PH III, we now get a division between elements that are bodies and those that are incorporeal, with examples of each type (359-66). The rest of the first book then deals with body, and its final sentence (440) proposes to move to the topic of incorporeals. This is indeed what happens in the second book. But the incorporeals talked about are not quite the ones we would expect from the initial list of incorporeal elements – numbers, limits of bodies, and Platonic forms (M IX.364). Instead, Sextus deals first with place and time – again, incorporeals according to the Stoics, but not elements according to anyone. Number does find its way into the discussion on the coat-tails of time (248), but limits and Platonic forms nowhere appear (although limits do make a brief appearance at the end of the first book, in the course of the discussion of body, M IX.430-5). The second book also includes an extensive discussion of motion, which is introduced on the coat-tails of place (M X.36), but which does not, as far as I know, figure in anyone’s view as either an element or an incorporeal. The final topic is coming into being and perishing (M X.310-51), and this Sextus does not even try to connect with the rickety structure that has been in place so far.25

III
The peculiarity in how Sextus treats the status of the section on God is, then, just part of a wider set of peculiarities in how Against the Physicists is constructed. Let us narrow in now on the section on God itself. In the Appendix I offer a comprehensive breakdown of the contents of this section; here I continue to keep my eye on structural oddities, while also examining some arguments individually along the way. Again a comparison with PH III may be instructive. The brief discussion of God in PH III follows a pattern common in Sextus: first it raises difficulties in the conception of God (3-5), and then argues that, even if God is conceivable, we must suspend judgement about whether or not God exists (6-9). It ends with a version of a familiar conundrum for believers: how there can be a god that is both omnipotent and benevolent, given all the bad things that happen in the world. Sextus’ strategy is to argue that whatever response believers offer to this puzzle, they are guilty of impiety, because they are committed to denying some central aspect of the generally recognized conception of God (9-12). There is no precise analogue to this last section in Against the Physicists. But the discussion of God in the latter work ends with a brief reference (on which I will have more to say later) to the divergence of ordinary religious opinion, which is designed to reinforce the suspension of judgement about gods’ existence that the prior treatment has already induced (M IX.191-2); and Sextus adds that the myth-making of poets who write about gods “puts an additional seal on” (προσέπισθεράγγεζομένης, 192) the same point – namely, that suspension of judgement is the only possible attitude to this topic – since it is “full of every impiety”, as observed by Xenophanes in his denunciation of Homer and Hesiod (192-3). In neither work is the force of the allegations of impiety made absolutely clear. But one can see them in both works as amounting to a kind of self-refutation argument; if a belief in gods results in one’s being impious
by the very standards that that belief brings with it, then the original belief is surely undermined.\textsuperscript{27}

Aside from this closing issue, \textit{Against the Physicists} follows the same broad sequence of topics as \textit{PH} III; the discussion of God or gods begins with a section on the conception of God and continues with a section on the existence or non-existence of gods. One significant difference is that whereas the \textit{PH} III discussion addresses the latter topic with a very brief and general series of Agrippan arguments, the discussion in \textit{Against the Physicists} offers numerous specific arguments in favor of the existence of God, followed by numerous specific arguments against (60-190), and a declaration that suspension of judgement is the result (191, 194). This, of course, renders the treatment of this topic in \textit{Against the Physicists} much richer in terms of its content, whatever one may think about the structural issues with which I have been concerned; and this is typical of the differences between Sextus’ longer work and \textit{PH}, which Sextus frequently reminds us is only an “outline”. One effect in the present case is that there are no parallel passages between the two works on the question of the existence of God.

And the same is true of the opening section on the conception of God.\textsuperscript{28} For the discussion in \textit{Against the Physicists} opens not with arguments against the conceivability of God, but with a series of attempted \textit{explanations} of how we could have come to have the conception of God. These include seemingly deflationary accounts, such as the one according to which gods are a fabrication designed to achieve social stability, but also others, such as Epicurus’ claim that we come to the conception of gods through the experience of super-human forms in dreams, that are not decisive as to whether or not gods do indeed exist (14-28). Sextus then argues that, aside from the fact that these explanations are all in competition with one another, with no way of resolving the dispute, they all fail individually (29): either they presuppose, question-beggingly,
that some people already possess the conception of God, or they fail to explain why the process in question leads to a conception of God (rather than, say, of an outsize human being), or they involve circular reasoning (30-48). The upshot is that there is no adequate account of how we could have come to have the conception of God.

A natural question to raise is what this is supposed to show; and Sextus’ answer is not clear. He immediately continues “Since not everything that is conceived also shares in existence, but a thing can be conceived, yet not exist … it will be necessary after the inquiry about the conception of gods to look into their existence as well” (49). Apparently, then, as in PH III, we are now meant to proceed on the supposition that God can be conceived, and to move to the question of God’s existence. But this transition is much less neat than in PH III. One might think Sextus intends the same as in PH III: namely, that the foregoing discussion has shown that God cannot be conceived, but that, even supposing this were not so, there are further difficulties having to do with God’s existence. But the inconceivability of God does not follow from what he has just argued; from the fact that no good explanation has been given of how we came to have a conception of God, it does not follow that there is not or cannot be any such conception. In fact, Sextus alludes to a universally shared conception of God in the course of the argument itself (33). Does he, then, take himself to have established that God can be conceived? That, too, seems unlikely; he may have presupposed this, but his focus was on a different topic altogether.

Sextus is not the only one to treat the question how the conception of God arose as a preliminary to the question whether God exists. The same order appears in the first book of Aetius, as reconstructed by Diels from pseudo-Plutarch and Stobaeus; in the course of a summary of views on basic physical principles, we have a chapter on “Whence humans obtained
a conception of God” (πόθεν ἕννοιαν ἔσχον θεῶν ἀνθρωποι), followed by a chapter on “Who is God” (τίς ἐστιν ὁ θεός), which begins with some arguments for the non-existence of God before proceeding to a series of positive views about God’s nature.29 As David Runia has observed,30 there can be a point to treating both topics together, and in this order, and the comment of Sextus that I quoted in the previous paragraph expresses this point: just because we can conceive something, and can see how we came to conceive it, it does not follow that that thing exists, or is as we conceive it. This kind of scheme might work either in a sceptical context or in a non-sceptical one such as Aetius. However, Sextus’ actual discussion of how we arrived at the conception of God is not well suited to play its role in such a scheme. The Aetius chapter on how we came to have our conception of God simply lists a variety of explanations, and in a tone that is neutral as to their implications concerning God’s existence. The chapter on the existence and nature of God that follows is not without problems;31 but the role of the chapter on the conception as a prelude to it is unproblematic. By contrast, it looks as if Sextus, or his source, has seized on the subject of explanations for our conception of God as itself material for sceptical polemic; so we get a list of explanations, and then a series of arguments for why they all fail. There is nothing inherently wrong with this; but it does mean that the transition from the topic of conception to that of existence is somewhat awkward, because there is no clear connection between the section on conception and the transitional comment “even if we can conceive something, it does not follow that it exists”. A non-sceptical account of how our conception of God arose, as in Aetius, would lead naturally into that transition, and so would an argument, as in PH III, to the effect that there is no clear conception of God. But an argument that there is no good explanation for why we have the conception that we have does not.32
Nonetheless, the discussion now turns to the question of the existence of the gods. Sextus begins (50-9) by mentioning the various possible positions; that they do exist, as held by ordinary people and by most dogmatists, that they do not, as argued by a few, and that they “no more” do than do not, which in Pyrrhonist terminology (or at least, in Sextus’ incarnation of it) is equivalent to expressing the sceptics’ own suspension of judgement (cf. \textit{PH} I.188-91). Versions of the negative position receive by far the most attention here and, as often in ancient discussions, views that may actually warrant the label “atheist”, as we now understand it, are mixed with others, such as Protagoras’, that we would classify as agnostic. One oddity of this exposition is that it overlaps considerably with the earlier list of deflationary views concerning the origin of our conception of God. The famous fragment of the satyr play, ascribed by Sextus to Critias, on the wise and clever person who invented God as a deterrent to unobserved bad behavior, is cited here (54), but might just as well have gone in the earlier section; and Prodicus and Euhemerus, alleged here to be atheists (51-2), did appear in the earlier section, described in very similar terms but with a little more detail (17-18). Some parallels with the atheistic section in Aetius make it likely that this material originally belonged in a summary of atheistic views, not in an account of the origins of our conception of God. Aetius also quotes parts of the so-called \textit{Sisyphus} fragment, though ascribing them to Euripides rather than Critias (I.7.2), and quotes several lines from Callimachus about Euhemerus, one of which Sextus (and no one else) also quotes, as well as mentioning two other usual suspects (Diagoras of Melos and Theodorus of Cyrene) who also appear in Sextus’ list (\textit{Placita} I.7.1, \textit{M IX.51}). Again, it is not that there is anything wrong with such ideas appearing in the section on the origins of our conceptions; for arguments for the non-existence of God may very well proceed by means of \textit{explaining away} belief in God – in other words, explaining how we could have come to believe that there is a God
(of a certain character) even though there is not. What is problematic, and a sign of inexpert editing on Sextus’ part, is simply that more or less the same material appears twice in close succession, with no acknowledgement of the repetition.

Once the positions have been outlined, the arguments on each side begin. And here again there are some peculiarities in the arrangement of the material. The arguments in favor are announced as being of four kinds (60): from universal agreement, from the order of the universe, from the absurd consequences of denying the divine, and from the refutation of opposing arguments. As often in Sextus, the Stoics are the Dogmatists most often cited, but others get some attention as well. The first two kinds of argument proceed in an orderly sequence (61-74, 75-122), and the arguments from the absurd consequences of denying the divine then begin (123); in each case Sextus gives us a clear indication that one kind of argument has ended and the next one is beginning. The third kind of argument extends for just ten sections (123-32); the general form of these arguments is that if one does away with the divine, one must also accept the non-existence of numerous other things – piety, wisdom, justice, and various forms of prediction that depend on contact with the gods or knowledge of signs provided by them – which would be absurd. Whether the denial of such things is really absurd, or is really a necessary consequence of denying the divine, seems highly questionable. But the boundaries of the third part are nonetheless clear; Sextus ends by saying “but it is absurd to do away with so large a number of things that are actually (ἡδη) believed in by all human beings” (132). We are now almost at the end of the arguments for the existence of God. What has happened to the fourth type of argument, from the refutation of opposing arguments?

The sequence of positive arguments ends with an argument from the Stoic Zeno: “One might reasonably honor the gods; but one might not reasonably honor those who do not exist;
therefore gods exist” (133), followed by an objection and Stoic replies to it (133-6).\textsuperscript{34} This is clearly an instance of refutation of opposing arguments, and it does not belong under any of the other headings. But it is not introduced as such; we are never given an introduction to the fourth type of argument. Instead Sextus simply says “Zeno also put forward an argument like this” (133), and then, immediately after the discussion of Zeno’s argument, marks the end of the entire sequence of positive arguments (137).

What has happened is that the refutation of opposing arguments is interspersed throughout; except for the isolated final argument from Zeno, whose status Sextus does not clarify, it does not constitute a separate section of its own.\textsuperscript{35} Already in the first section on universal agreement Sextus inserts an opposing argument, followed by a response to it (66-74). And the same thing happens several times in the section on the order of the universe (96-7, 108-10, 121-2) and once in the section on the absurd consequences of denying the divine (127-31, which occupies at least half the section). Several of these passages, including the closing one about Zeno, follow a common pattern: the opponents offer an argument that they claim is precisely parallel in form to the argument just offered, but whose conclusion is plainly unacceptable, and the supporters of the original argument then give reasons for thinking that the purported parallel argument is not in fact parallel (96-7, 108-10, 133-6). In each place Sextus refers to the parallel argument by the term παραβολή (and to the procedure by the corresponding verb παραβάλλω);\textsuperscript{36} and it looks as if this was a recognized technical term (see Philodemus On Rhetoric I, col.II, 17-20). There is reason to believe that this highly structured approach originated in critiques of a number of Zeno’s syllogisms by his contemporary Alexinus, cited by Sextus in one of these contexts (108), with later Stoics, in particular Diogenes of Babylon (see 134), then supplying the counter-moves in support of Zeno – counter-moves that
often took the form of subtle interpretations, favorable to Stoicism as they understood it, of what
Zeno’s original bold claims really amounted to.\(^{37}\) This latter aspect fits nicely with Sextus’
purpose at this point, which is not to provide opposing arguments of equal strength – that comes
later – but to bolster the case in favor of the existence of God by showing ways in which it can
deal with counter-arguments. We do, then, have arguments of all four of the types that Sextus
signals at the outset of the positive part; but we do not have each type one by one, as both his
preamble (60) and the structural markers through most of this part would lead one to expect.

The arguments against the existence of God (137-90) do not show any similar kind of
structural oddity. What is perhaps surprising is that these negative arguments appear to have
nothing to do with the people labeled as atheists in the initial listing of possible positions. We
are told in the earlier passage, for example, that Theodorus the atheist “demolished the Greeks’
ideas about the gods in a variety of ways in his treatise On the Gods” (55), yet there is no hint
that this work is being appealed to when Sextus comes to his own exposition of the negative side.
Perhaps the details of these people’s views were already somewhat hard to determine by Sextus’
time; they do seem to be a collection of stock atheists all of whom lived centuries earlier. And
perhaps Sextus is simply repeating what his source says about Theodorus’ book, without having
read it himself. But Sextus’ remark at the end of the initial listing of positions, that we shall see
what the sceptical position is when we have gone through “the things contended from either
side” (ἐκατέρωθεν τὰ ἐπιχειρούμενα, 59), certainly leads one to expect that the arguments to
follow will have some connection with the parties to the dispute just enumerated. In fact,
though, as is very often the case, Sextus’ main focus is on positions and debates of the major
Hellenistic schools. As others have noticed, the positive arguments draw largely, though not
exclusively, on Stoic ideas, while the negative arguments are heavily indebted to Carneades and
the Academic tradition; the degree of overlap with the positive arguments of the Stoic Balbus in book II, and the negative arguments of the Academic Cotta in book III, of Cicero’s *De natura deorum* is one of the things that makes this clear.\(^{38}\) In one sense, then, Sextus’ procedure here is by no means unexpected. But it is yet another example of how the unity and organization of the work leaves something to be desired.

The arguments against the existence of gods ends with a series of sorites arguments explicitly attributed to Carneades (182-90). The general point is that if one accepts the existence of some generally recognized god, one is forced to accept the existence of an ever-proliferating list of gods, ending with things that it would be absurd to consider divine – which is then said to be a *reductio* of the original supposition.\(^{39}\) Prior to this, the vast majority of the arguments take the form of suggesting that if God has some characteristic that we are bound to accept if we accept that there is a God at all, it follows that God is perishable (\(\phi\theta\alpha\rho\tau\omega\zeta\)), which is a contradiction in terms.\(^{40}\) Again the characteristics in question are largely associated with a specifically Stoic conception of God; God is an animal, God possesses various virtues of a particularly Stoic cast,\(^{41}\) and so on. The central idea is generally that if one admits these characteristics, one is accepting that God is a sentient, active being, and that necessarily brings with it the possibility of things going wrong, or changing for the worse, from God’s point of view – and change for the worse entails perishability. There are also occasional arguments in which a certain supposition – typically one of a pair of exhaustive alternatives – leads to the opposite result, namely that God is inanimate or inactive (148-9, 151, 181);\(^{42}\) but that is equally repugnant to our conceptions of God. The upshot is that there is no way for all the features considered (at least by the Stoics, but by others as well) to be essential to God to be combined in the same being; so there can be no such being.
The arguments both for and against the existence of God have been discussed, either individually or as groups, in a number of fine recent studies; aside from the points already raised, I would have little to add to their treatments. For this reason I have chosen not to provide a systematic analysis of these arguments in the main body of the paper; both for this part of the text and for the remainder of the section assigned to me, the Appendix will serve that function. What I would like to discuss in the remainder of the paper is the relation between the sceptical result to which the juxtaposition of these arguments leads and the ordinary practice of religion. This, too, has not lacked for discussion in recent years. But in this case I am not as sanguine as some have been about whether a consistent position is available to Sextus.

IV

Sextus has just one direct comment in Against the Physicists that bears upon this topic. Having completed the section on the conception of God, and introducing the question whether gods exist, he says “For perhaps the sceptic will be found to be safer than those who philosophize differently; in line with his ancestral customs and laws, he says that there are gods and does everything that tends to worship of and reverence towards them, but as far as philosophical investigation is concerned, he makes no rash moves” (M IX.49). A similar remark occurs at the opening of the section on God in PH III (2), where it is the dogmatists’ “rashness” (προπετεία) that is said to be the target of the arguments to follow; and the mention of “ancestral customs and laws” also recalls Sextus’ general account in PH I of how the sceptic can act. One of the four broad categories of “appearances” by which the sceptic’s life is shaped is “handing down of laws and customs” (23). And that a religious dimension to such laws and customs is central is suggested by the example he gives of action prompted by them: “we accept acting piously as good and acting impiously as bad, in terms of ordinary life (βιωτικῶς)” (24). Clearly, then,
there is a level of everyday religious practice, including everyday religious speech, that is
supposed to be unaffected by the sceptical arguments. That we have no choice but to suspend
judgement as to whether gods exist is apparently no bar to the sceptic continuing to observe the
norms of ordinary Greek religion. This much is common to both works. But Against the
Physicists includes an additional reference to the greater “safety” of the sceptic as compared with
the dogmatist. As Gábor Betegh has recently pointed out, the sceptic is certainly not alone
among philosophers in participating in everyday forms of worship; Platonists, Stoics,
Peripatetics and even Epicureans took part in the traditional cults as well\textsuperscript{44} – this despite the fact
that many of them were highly critical of aspects of traditional religion. We shall return to some
of these cases later. But if they all engage in the same religious practice (including religious
speech), why is the sceptic “safer” than the others?

The mention of safety in connection with claims concerning the existence of God (in
conditions of uncertainty) may seem reminiscent of Pascal’s wager; and Sextus’ point might be
that one runs less risk of divine wrath (supposing gods do exist) if one avoids definite but
possibly false views about the gods’ existence or nature – but nonetheless worships them in the
usual way – than if one holds and propounds such views. But there are other possibilities. One
is that this posture makes one safer from disapproval (or worse) from one’s fellow humans. If
one offers definite views about the nature of the gods, one is liable to come into conflict with
some aspect of traditional conceptions of them;\textsuperscript{45} the sceptic avoids this by offering no definite
views but conforming to the usual practices. Sextus’ own argument in PH III (9-12) for the
impiety of those who claim that there are gods looks like support for this reading – if we keep in
mind that the entire section on God in PH III is directed against the rashness of the dogmatists;
as we saw, Sextus’ strategy is to argue that there is no possible answer a (dogmatic) believer may
give to the question of the gods’ providence that does not come into conflict with some aspect of
the generally recognized conception of God. Another possibility is that scepticism makes one
safer from worries stemming from the thought that one might be wrong – worries to which
Sextus takes the Dogmatists quite generally to be subject, but which are perhaps particularly
pressing when it comes to religion. And yet another, supported by other uses of the word “safe”
in Sextus (M II.52, III.1, VII.151, VIII.300, 374, 473), is that he is referring simply
to intellectual safety; if you make no definite commitments, you are just less likely to be
mistaken (with or without the element of worry) than if you do – in fact, you are guaranteed not
to be mistaken.

Since Sextus says no more on the subject, it is difficult to know how to choose among
these various possibilities (and they are not, of course, mutually exclusive). But the mention of
the sceptic’s conventionally religious practice and utterances in close connection with the
reference to safety does seem to suggest that at least part of why the sceptic is supposed to be
better off is that by going along with the usual observances he avoids the risk of giving offense,
either to gods or to humans. In other words, it seems to support one or both of the first two
readings in the previous paragraph. But there is something very puzzling about this. If the
dogmatists are potentially in trouble from the gods or from society for their committed but
arguably heterodox views about the nature of the divine, why is the sceptic not also in trouble for
his sceptical stance of non-commitment? Perhaps refusing to say whether or not there are gods,
or what they are like if they exist, is less offensive than declaring that the gods are of a character
arguably incompatible with how they are usually conceived; but it is far from clear why it would
be wholly inoffensive. Sextus’ answer will surely be that the sceptic “says that there are gods
and does everything that tends to worship of and reverence towards them”; in other words, that
his scepticism does not affect his everyday religious observances. But as I noted, a dogmatist of virtually any stripe also “says that there are gods and does everything that tends to worship of and reverence towards them”; why does that not get him off the hook just as effectively? If the answer is that the dogmatist’s heterodox theoretical statements about the divine convict him of insincerity, the counter-response must be that the sceptic’s suspension of judgement convicts him of exactly the same thing. Possibly the dogmatist’s theoretical statements and everyday religious utterances could be seen as contradicting one another, whereas the sceptic makes no statement that contradicts everyday religion. But on the face of it, there is at least a pragmatic inconsistency between suspending judgement about the truth of the sentence “there are gods” and uttering that very sentence; and again, it is very doubtful that a sceptic’s fence-sitting would be in no way irksome to the divine or human authorities. (Fence-sitting may be a way to avoid rashness in philosophical contexts, but in everyday contexts it may sometimes be decidedly rash.)

Sextus’ reference to the sceptic’s greater safety is therefore difficult to make out – a point that has not, I think, been generally recognized. He may perhaps be at risk of less severe disapproval than the dogmatists (though even this is open to question); but “safer” suggests “less liable to danger” rather than “liable to less danger”, and that case has not been made. But even if one dismisses the claim about safety as an isolated piece of bluster, there remains Sextus’ profession of adherence to ordinary religion, and this is consistent in both works. And there is a serious question as to how to understand this. As we saw, this is just one aspect – though apparently a rather important one – of the sceptic’s general adherence to his society’s laws and customs. But the care Sextus takes, in both works, to remind the reader of his conventional piety at the start of his discussions of God’s existence makes it look as if he sees a possibility that
these discussions will be read the wrong way, as constituting an attack on ordinary religion. The worry is not unreasonable. As has often been pointed out, the ancient Greek category of “atheist” was extremely capacious, covering people (if there were any) who actually believed there were no gods, people such as Protagoras who announced that they were not sure, and sometimes people such as Socrates, who, there is good reason to think, believed non-standard things about God. And clearly anyone accused of being an atheist was understood as believing something that undermined ordinary religion. Suspension of judgement about the existence of the gods is by no means obviously beyond the scope of this elastic but damning term. So Sextus has good reason to underline the fact that he is not saying anything intended to subvert ordinary religion.

But how is this supposed to work? One way to address this question is to ask what exactly Sextus means by claiming that, in a religious context, the sceptic can do and say various things “in terms of ordinary life” (PH I.24) without violating suspension of judgement. A possible answer is that the sceptic performs the actions involved in religious rituals, but does not hold any of the beliefs that we might think are associated with them; he does these things because he has been raised in a society in which these things are done, but not because he believes these are the right things to do, or the things the gods want us to do. The things in question include sacrifices, dietary choices and other matters of religious behavior, but they also include saying certain things in appropriate contexts. Whether they include saying the very words “there are gods”, as Sextus’ wording might imply, is less clear, since these are not exactly part of ordinary Greco-Roman religious practice; but maybe he means that the sceptic says things about specific gods or the gods in general that would naturally be taken to entail the statement “there are gods”. In any case, the sceptic does not, on this interpretation, thereby express any
belief, and so there is no conflict between these utterances and the suspension of judgement he declares in his writings. This stance may be regarded as hypocritical or disingenuous, either because it involves him in saying things without believing them, or because it renders highly dubious his claim to be following ordinary life. It may also do little to ward off the suspicion that his philosophical utterances on the subject of the gods’ existence are subversive of ordinary religious practice.

Another, more interesting and promising interpretation is that ordinary religious practice and utterance are in some way “autonomous” with respect to philosophical theory about the divine. The clearest version of this that I have seen is by Julia Annas, who proposes a distinction between theological beliefs, which are the province of philosophers, including the sceptic when engaging in philosophical debate, and religious beliefs and practices, which belong to ordinary people, including the sceptic when “following ordinary life”. Theological beliefs, then, have to do with questions of whether or not the gods really exist and what their true nature is, while religious beliefs are beliefs bound up with the everyday business of religion (such as, to use an example from elsewhere in Sextus, “it is pious to sacrifice goats to Artemis, but not to Asclepius”, PH III.221). But the crucial point, on any version of the “autonomy” view, is that the everyday level and the theoretical level do not interact with one another; everyday religious practice and utterance can go their own way without needing support, and without being vulnerable to attack, from philosophical argument. If this is the case, then Sextus’ suspension of judgement and his everyday religious observances are perfectly compatible.

This interpretation fits nicely with Sextus’ periodic insistence on being “on the side of ordinary life” as against the theoretical pontificating of the dogmatists (e.g., PH II.102). It also seems to fit nicely with the fact that in ancient pagan religion, it is the rituals themselves that
seem to be primary, rather than affirmations of belief; I shall have a little more to say about this later. The problem is that Sextus’ own assumptions about the relation between ordinary religious beliefs and discussions of the divine among philosophers, as revealed by his sceptical examinations of the topic, seem not to conform to the idea of a division between two levels.

For one thing, the things that Sextus claims the sceptics say in everyday religious contexts seem to include the same kinds of things as are subjected to sceptical scrutiny: according to him, the sceptics say that there are gods (PH III.2, M IX.49) and that they are provident (PH III.2), but these are precisely the propositions that are undermined in the discussions that immediately follow. As I noted earlier, one might take Sextus to mean that the sceptic, in his ordinary religious practice, says things that entail that there are gods, rather than saying the actual words “there are gods”. But it really makes no difference whether or not this is so; if the sceptic takes himself to be committed by his everyday practice to asserting that there are gods, it is just as puzzling that the sceptical discussions are not supposed to upset that everyday practice as it would be if the everyday practice included that very assertion.

In addition, although Sextus does emphasize that his philosophical discussions are directed against the Dogmatists, this does not prevent him including the views of ordinary people alongside those of Dogmatic philosophers in the mix of items to be placed in mutual opposition with a view to suspension of judgement. At the beginning of the discussion of the existence of God in Against the Physicists, he lists as believers in God’s existence “most of the Dogmatists and the common preconception of ordinary life” (M IX.50); these are then contrasted with the atheists and with the sceptical suspenders of judgement. It is true that the subsequent arguments rehearsed on the positive side of the issue are all Dogmatists’ arguments – including the argument that takes as evidence the universal belief in the divine. But this is hardly surprising,
since arguments on this score are precisely the province of philosophers, not ordinary people; this does not negate the fact that sceptical suspension of judgement is presented as an alternative to ordinary people’s belief in gods just as much as to Dogmatists’ beliefs in gods.

This point is reinforced at the end of the discussion. Sextus says that the opposing arguments from the Dogmatists lead to sceptical suspension of judgement. He then says that to these oppositions can be added “the lack of uniformity about the gods in ordinary life” (M IX.191). He goes on to say that “Different people have different and discordant suppositions about them [i.e., the gods], so that neither are all of them [i.e., the suppositions] trustworthy because of the conflict between them, nor are some of them because of their equal strength” (192). Presumably this conflict is about the nature and perhaps the number of the gods, since he has already said that ordinary people quite generally believe in the existence of gods. But the conflict and “equal strength” among the alternative views nonetheless adds to the impetus for suspension of judgement about the gods’ existence because if no one view of the nature of the gods is of any greater plausibility than any other, one might well begin to wonder whether there are any gods at all. As we noted earlier, Sextus now cites as an additional point with the same force the impiety of many poetic depictions of the gods, a point brought out by Xenophanes’ criticism of Homer and Hesiod for the immorality of their depictions (192-193). Here too, the impiety being alleged is the impiety of everyday religious conceptions, not of philosophical conceptions of the divine; as Xenophanes himself says elsewhere, “everyone has learned from Homer from the beginning” (DK 21B10), and Heraclitus says much the same about Hesiod (DK 22B57). It seems clear, then, that Sextus takes ordinary religious beliefs to be relevant to the sceptical outcome of his whole discussion; while the arguments of the Dogmatists are his main
focus of attention, he does not take ordinary beliefs to be on a separate level from these, and therefore immune to the effects of his sceptical procedure.\textsuperscript{58}

V

So the “autonomy” interpretation seems difficult to sustain in light of what Sextus actually says. He claims to be religious in the same way as ordinary people are religious; this includes doing certain things, such as sacrificing the right animals to the right gods, and it includes saying certain things, such as that the gods exist (or at least, saying things that entail such assertions). And yet the existence of the gods, among other general features of the gods such as their providentiality (\textit{PH} III.9-12), are precisely the topics on which his sceptical machinery is used to generate suspension of judgement. Sextus seems to recognize that his sceptical exercises in this area might leave him open to criticism as irreligious; as noted earlier, this is the obvious explanation of the care he takes to emphasize up front that he is religious in the ordinary way, and that his quarrel is with the Dogmatists. The trouble is that this does not seem consistent with the fact that ordinary religious beliefs (in general – not just a selected, perhaps non-Greek set) figure alongside Dogmatic theological positions in the material at which the sceptical machinery is directed.

This is not the only case where the beliefs of ordinary people are among the beliefs from which Sextus says the sceptic suspends judgement. Another is the case of beliefs to the effect that certain things are good and bad. This is a very important subject for Sextus, because it is beliefs on this subject that he takes to be most responsible for the worry from which sceptical suspension of judgement sets one free; this is stressed in the opening section of \textit{PH} I (27-30), and in the ethical section of \textit{PH} III (235-8) as well as, at much greater length, in \textit{Against the Ethicists} (\textit{M} XI.110-67). Now, in the first of these passages he specifies that it is ordinary people
(ἵδιώται, 30) – not just philosophers – who hold that certain things are by nature good or bad, and who are therefore subject to the worry that the sceptic manages to avoid. In this case, then, Sextus does not claim to be fully in harmony with ordinary life; while the laws and customs of his native land may shape the sceptic’s behavior, including when he is confronted with appalling ethical dilemmas (M XI.164-6), he lacks the additional component of belief that both ordinary people and Dogmatic philosophers have, and this makes all the difference.

Given the fact that ordinary religious beliefs as well as Dogmatic beliefs about the gods serve as material for sceptical scrutiny, one might have expected that, at least in part, the case of religion would be parallel to this ethical case. Certainly one could imagine a distinction being drawn between an unreflective following of religious tradition, and a following of that tradition that is accompanied by intellectual commitment – which might itself vary in degrees of explicitness or strength – to its truth or correctness. It would surely be open to non-philosophers to occupy any position on this spectrum of attitudes. And, one might say, the more reflective end of the spectrum would parallel the ethical case just mentioned, where ordinary people are said to hold the belief that things are by nature good or bad. And this in turn would allow Sextus himself to go along with ordinary religious practices in the unreflective manner, while distancing himself from the more reflective type of religious attitudes adhered to by some non-philosophers, grouping these alongside the religious utterances of philosophers in his juxtapositions of opposing views – views about which his own attitude, without exception, is suspension of judgement.

All of this would indeed be possible, and would amount to an entirely consistent position. But Sextus shows not the slightest hint of going in this direction. There is no sign that he conceives of any distinction between different types of religious attitudes on the part of non-
philosophers. On the contrary, the phrase he uses to refer to the non-philosophical view that gods exist, the view that is among those on which he suspends judgement, is ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ βίου πρόληψις, “the common preconception of ordinary life” (M IX.50); this strongly implies that there is just one relevant non-philosophical attitude, and it certainly offers no support for the idea that what is meant is an attitude on the more reflective end of a spectrum of possible attitudes. Thus Sextus gives us no indication that the non-philosophers’ religious attitude here referred to, on which he tells us that the sceptic suspends judgement, is any different from the non-philosophers’ religious attitude with which he elsewhere aligns himself. The ethical parallel is not, then, in the end helpful in elucidating Sextus’ stance towards religion, and we are back in the uncomfortable position we were in before. On the one hand Sextus suspends judgement about a whole range of positions on the existence of god, including the ordinary person’s view that there are gods; yet in addition he arguably states, and at least strongly implies, that his own stance in “saying that there are gods” (M IX.49) is no different from that of the ordinary person.

It may strike us as curious, in any case, that Sextus emphasizes declarations of the gods’ existence as much as he does. As noted earlier, it is by now something of a commonplace that one should not think of ancient pagan religion as centered primarily around beliefs; what is most basic are the rituals themselves, and these did not necessarily – and in some cases, clearly did not in fact – carry with them any particular beliefs about why they were to be performed, or about the character of the gods in whose honor they were being performed. And this might seem to fit rather well with Sextus’ description of his own religious attitude as a simple product of law and custom; he engages in certain sacrifices and dietary habits because those are the things he was raised to do – purely as a matter of culture or tradition, without any beliefs to the effect that these are the right things to do – and so too, one might say, did practitioners of ancient religion
in general, if much modern scholarship on the subject is on the right lines. But this does not fit with what Sextus himself says (rightly or wrongly) about ordinary religious practitioners, and it sits uneasily with some of what he says about his own religious practice. Whatever modern scholarship may tell us, on Sextus’ picture ordinary people do not merely go through rituals as a matter of custom; they also hold beliefs about the gods, and these beliefs are among those on which the sceptic suspends judgement. And Sextus’ own religious practice, which he presents as in conformity with ordinary practice, includes saying certain things that are among the very things on which he elsewhere induces suspension of judgement. So unless Sextus leaves his scepticism at the door when he enters religious precincts – which would hardly square with his insistence on scepticism as a way of life, and with his religious practice as itself an instance of that sceptical way of life – it follows that he lacks certain beliefs that he takes ordinary religious practitioners to hold, and he says certain things in religious contexts that he does not actually believe.60

As we have already seen, Sextus is by no means the only ancient Greek philosopher who had attitudes towards the gods that look as if they are at odds with ordinary Greek religion, but who nonetheless engaged in ordinary religious practice.61 The Epicureans hold that ordinary religious beliefs are wrong, and disastrously so, on certain crucial points; most centrally, it is wrong to think that immortal and blessed beings would take the slightest interest in human affairs. For this reason (that is, because a purely uninvolved and inactive being would be no god at all) and perhaps for other reasons, some in the ancient world accused Epicurus of atheism – as indeed Sextus himself testifies in his review of actual or possible deniers of the existence of god (M IX.58; see also, e.g., Cicero, ND 1.85, 1.123 (citing Posidonius), 2.76, Plutarch, Adv. Col. 1119E). And some recent scholars have even argued that, despite his insistence that there are
gods, Epicurus’ own view (apparently modified by later Epicureans) was that the gods do not exist in any objective or external sense, but are mental constructs of ours. Yet it is very clear, from Philodemus’ *On Piety* and elsewhere, that Epicurus and other Epicureans took part, and enthusiastically recommended taking part, in ordinary religious practices. However, it is not hard to see how Epicurus could justify this. For the notion of God as immortal and blessed – which is also central to ordinary religious ideas – is one to which he does remain attached, and which he considers to be a powerful source of inspiration as we aim for ataraxia in our own lives. And the traditional rituals – provided one approached them with the correct attitude – might very well have seemed to him an appropriate vehicle for that inspiration.

Aristotle is somewhat more dismissive of ordinary religious ideas. In the course of his discussion of the divine unmoved mover in *Metaphysics* XII, he does acknowledge that ordinary religion preserves a core insight into the divinity in nature (1074a38-b3). But he then says that the rest of traditional conceptions are a “mythical [i.e., fictional] addition” (μυθικῶς … προσθέται, 1074b4) useful for reinforcing law-abiding behavior. Yet this does not prevent him from directing in his will that large stone statues to Zeus and Athena be set up in fulfilment of a vow he had made (DL V.16) – which reads like a conventional religious gesture of a wealthy Greek. But here, too, the practice can be seen to make sense in light of the theory. First, like Epicurus, Aristotle does think there is something right about ordinary religious ideas – just as he thinks there is something right about most ordinary ideas – and ordinary religious practice might have seemed to him an appropriate method for expressing the truth those ideas embody. But second, if one thinks ordinary religion is a valuable device for maintaining order in society, it may make sense for one to engage in and encourage it even if one thinks it depends on false beliefs. Indeed, even someone who held the view expressed in the dramatic fragment that
*Against the Physicists* ascribes to Critias (*M* IX.54) might very well see it as sensible to engage in ordinary religious practices (and to “say that there are gods”). On this view, unlike on Aristotle’s, God is a fiction through and through; but the fiction nonetheless has great social utility – provided, of course, that its fictionality does not become widely known.\(^65\)

Sextus, however, is not in a position to accept any of these rationales for his adherence to ordinary religion. For all of them require, at minimum, that one accept certain states of affairs as genuinely good or bad. Some of them also require a certain amount of theorizing about the nature and purpose of society. And some of them require that one accept some aspects of ordinary religious beliefs as correct – that is, true to how things are in reality – which is precisely what he does not do. The fact that other philosophers besides Sextus call ordinary religion into question while still outwardly – and, in some cases and to some degree, even inwardly – accepting it does not help us to explain or justify his stance on the matter.

Nor is it possible to explain his stance along fideist lines. Earlier I mentioned Pascal’s wager as a possible and partial analogy to Sextus’ remark in *Against the Physicists* that his position with regard to religion is “safer” than that of the Dogmatists. However, the result of Pascal’s wager, if one carries it through successfully, is that one comes to have faith in God despite the impossibility of getting beyond sceptical impasse about God’s existence at the level of intellectual argument.\(^66\) And the idea of making oneself hold a belief on no rational grounds – a belief about the very *same* thing on which one has previously come to suspend judgement as a result of sceptical argumentation – is about as far from Sextus’ approach as it is possible to imagine.

Finally, some in modern times, such as Wittgenstein, have argued for an expressivist view of religious utterances, according to which they are not statements of beliefs in any
straightforward sense. In addition, some have regarded everyday discourse as somehow “insulated” from the effects of sceptical argument, so that the very same form of words – such as, for example, “I know I left my keys on the table” – could be seen as perfectly acceptable in an everyday register, but highly questionable in the philosophical register; one could perhaps imagine some analogous strategy with regard to religious discourse. But it is clear that neither of these sorts of moves is available to Sextus. By his account, ordinary people say that there are gods, and they mean just the same by that as do philosophical Dogmatists who use the same words. Ordinary religious discourse does, then, in his view state beliefs, and it is not insulated from the philosophical realm.

This is not to deny that there may be a level of everyday belief that is immune from sceptical argumentation, and that the sceptic may perfectly well adopt. The exact nature of the sceptic’s everyday beliefs, if any, is a central and unresolved issue in the interpretation of ancient Greek skepticism. But although Sextus insists that he is in conformity with everyday attitudes when it comes to religion, *this* is not a case where he professes beliefs in an everyday context that can be considered immune from the effects of his scepticism. Rather, it is a case, like that of beliefs about what is really good and bad, where the beliefs of ordinary people – at least, as he himself interprets them – touch on the real nature of things, and are therefore vulnerable to sceptical scrutiny. So despite his claim to be in tune with ordinary life, he cannot consistently hold some of the religious beliefs that, on his own view, ordinary people hold.

This is a disappointing conclusion: Sextus does not, in the end, have an acceptable story to tell about the relation between his approach to everyday religion and his sceptical discussions about God. But at least, to return to a main theme in the earlier part of this paper, *Against the Physicists* is not appreciably worse off in this respect than *PH*. I hope that my many rather
negative assessments of Sextus, particularly in *Against the Physicists*, do not contribute to a sense that the study of this work is of little value. There are lots of reasons why the study of flawed works can be worthwhile – sometimes despite, but sometimes also precisely because of, their flaws.  

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February 2011
Barnes 1990: 2677. As the title suggests, Barnes’ comment applies to the section of M IX dealing with causation.

Aside from these references in the text, the two books of Against the Physicists and the single book Against the Ethicists are labeled in the manuscripts as books VIII, IX and X of Sextus’ Σκεπτικά, or of his Ὑπομνήματα. Diogenes (IX.116) also refers to Sextus’ Σκεπτικά in ten books. There is actually a back-reference to a work Sextus calls Ὑπομνήματα at PH I.222. Annas & Barnes 2000, note ad loc., make a strong case that Σκεπτικά Ὑπομνήματα is the work here referred to; and this might seem to settle the question of the order of composition. But Sextus does also refer to works of his called Ἐμπειρικά Ὑπομνήματα (M I.61) and Ἰατρικά Ὑπομνήματα (M VII.202); and besides, it is always possible that a single isolated reference could have been added later. I therefore hesitate to place much weight on this passage, tempting as it is to do so.

On the fact (I think we may safely refer to it as such) that Sextus’ longer work is incomplete in its present form, see Janácek 1963; Blomqvist 1974. The numbering referred to in the previous note suggests that the lost general portion was five books long; if so, and if these lost books were anything like the size of the surviving books, the complete work must have been truly massive.

See especially Janácek 1972 and Janácek 1948. A complete bibliography of Janácek’s works in this area can be found at the end of Barnes 1992; the article also includes an excellent sketch of Janácek’s methods (see especially section X). Most, if not all, of Janácek’s smaller works have recently been republished (including some in German translation that originally appeared in Czech or Russian) in Janácek 2008. See also Jan Janda’s retrospective on Janácek’s work, Janda 2006.

I come to an exception below.

In the same way, it would be easy to separate my own published works into two groups – those before and those after about 1997 – by the much greater or lesser prevalence of “which” in contexts where written American English prefers “that”. Many readers will be able to point to similar stylistic evolutions in their writing, which are indications of date, but tell us nothing else of any importance.

Besides the comment of Barnes with which I began, see, e.g., Brunschwig 1994b: n.9.

I here retract a suggestion in Bett 1997: xxviii, n.49, that the passages on causation in the two works support the order of composition for which I have argued. The argument from parallels in Diogenes succeeds only where one of Sextus’ works is much closer to Diogenes than the other one (and therefore much closer to the common source on which they both appear to be drawing), but where the parallels between the two works of Sextus are themselves sufficiently close that one of them is clearly a reworking of the other (rather than possibly relying on a quite different source). The latter condition does not obtain in this case.

On the flimsiness of Janácek’s chronological suppositions, see Bett 1997: Appendix C.

Barnes 1992 is also sympathetic to the idea of an alternative form of Pyrrhonism accurately preserved by Diogenes, though without attributing it specifically to Aenesidemus.

This was with a TLG word searches using ἀναιρέω, ἀναφέρω and ἀνελλάδω. These do not exhaust all forms of the verb, but they are the usual ones in Sextus.

Several participants at the conference pointed out that this statement is qualified by “against those who think of body as what can be affected or affect”; and Keimpe Algra in his paper in this volume (?) points to similar instances to argue for an understanding of ἀναιρέω as referring to the defusing of an opponent’s argument, rather than to the outright “doing away with” some entity by Sextus himself. I think this accurately represents Sextus’ intentions in these passages. My point is simply that that is not what ἀναιρέω really means; it means “do away with”, not “defuse in a certain respect”. Its presence in such passages therefore seems to reinforce my main
XXI.116, and its use of the analogy with literal foundations strongly suggests that there are not. (PH III.1 speaks in comparative terms, recommending an attack on more general, rather than less general, targets. But it does not appeal to the metaphor of foundations. This seems designed to allow that there are other subjects to discuss besides principles. There is nothing like this at the opening of M IX.)

Malcolm Schofield suggested that the contrast to which Sextus is drawing attention is between an inquiry in which the opposing positions juxtaposed are dogmatic on both sides - the arguments against the existence of god, due in large part to Carneades (see below, section III), being regarded as negatively dogmatic – and one in which dogmatic positions are put in opposition to counter-arguments devised by the sceptics themselves. M IX.206-7, where dogmatic arguments are said to be juxtaposed with arguments of the άπορητικοί, a common synonym in Sextus for “sceptics”, contrasts nicely with the passage just quoted in the main text to support this reading. But again, this is not remotely the same thing as saying that his own inquiry concerning the gods is dogmatic (or even “sort of dogmatic”): for placing dogmatic views in opposition to one another does nothing whatever to make one dogmatic oneself. So if this is what he means, his way of expressing it is singularly inept.

One could perhaps try to read σύντρυκτος in the sense “by itself” or “independently”, the point being that active principles have so far received discussion on their own, and that there will follow a discussion of these in conjunction with material principles. But other uses of σύντρυκτος in Sextus tell against this; elsewhere it is always used to signal that a topic has received sufficient discussion, in preparation either for a new topic, or for an additional argument, labeled as strictly speaking superfluous, on the same topic (M VIII.130, IX.190, X.319, XI.110, I.247, III.17, V.85).

“Place” (τόπος) is one of the names that apply in different circumstances – the others, as Sextus points out (M X.2) being “void” (κενώ) and “room” (χώρα) – to the “intangible substance” that serves as the other basic entity in Epicurus’ cosmology besides bodies. But Epicurus is careful not to call it an element; only the atomic bodies are elements. See Letter to Pythocles, DL X.86. For a good brief discussion of the issue, see Long & Sedley 1987: vol.1, commentary on section 5.

The section on coming-into-being and perishing does contain some back-references to other sections (e.g., M X.320, 324); and, as James Warren points out, the same device for connecting topics (where the existence of one thing presupposes the existence of something else already discussed) appears a number of times in the second book. See Warren 2003: 315-16. See also Warren’s paper in this volume, which (?) includes a more positive account of the ways in which the section on coming-into-being and perishing connects with the rest of Against the Physicists.
It remains true, however, that Sextus never says anything to explain how this final section fits into the overall structure of the two books.

26 I do not intend this phrase as a *translation* of Sextus’ ἀφιλόγοις καὶ ποιηταῖς, but these are in fact who he is referring to. The important point is that ἀφιλόγος does not mean “theologian”, i.e. someone engaged in theoretical or academic discourse about divine matters. A ἀφιλόγος is, as the etymology suggests, simply someone who talks about gods, and the word normally seems to be used of poetical or other popular depictions of them, not of philosophical reflections about them. Aristotle also connects ἀφιλόγοι with poetry in the phrase “those around Hesiod and all those who are ἀφιλόγοι” (Met. 1000a9), and the murky views he goes on to attribute scornfully to this undifferentiated group are anything but theoretical. The juxtaposition ἀφιλόγοι καὶ ποιηταῖς also appears in Philodemus *On Piety* II.2481-2; see Obbink 1996: note ad loc. The word appears nowhere else in Sextus (unless Bekker is right in his conjecture at M II.31). But earlier in *Against the Physicists* (M IX.55) he speaks of Theodorus as skewering τὰ παρὰ τοῖς Ἐλλησι τοιούτους; here again we are talking about ideas in broad currency in the culture, ideas of which the poets would be the most important vehicles.

27 The difference is that the clause “by the very standards that that belief brings with it” is less clearly made out in *Against the Physicists*; Xenophanes’ critique of traditional religion is plausibly seen as revisionary, rather than as drawing to the attention of Homer and Hesiod (and ordinary followers of the religion) an inconsistency in what they already believed. By contrast, the argument in *PH* III does seem clearly designed to accuse the believers of impiety on grounds they themselves would accept. I return to these passages below; see end of section IV.

28 Thus, although the two works follow the same general pattern in their respective sections on God, there are no cases where the later work (whichever it is) includes a revised version of the very same material as appeared in the earlier work.

31 On the opening atheistic section in particular, see the detailed analysis of Runia 1996.
32 This is not the only place, in the longer work of which *Against the Physicists* is part, where Sextus is less than clear about his purposes in discussing the conceptions of things; another example is *Against the Ethicists* 21-41. For discussion of this case, and of the general difference between Ξεπτικά and *PH* in this regard, see Bett 1997: 62-4.

33 Runia 1996: 553-4, says that a common source must be involved for the Callimachus quotations. This seems to me too strong – is it impossible for two people to quote the same line of verse independently? But this and the other parallels taken together do strongly suggest a common source (although not one relied on slavishly by both authors, and perhaps not one drawn on directly by both; the language, order, etc. are not especially close).

34 For a fascinating and detailed examination of this argument, see Brunschwig 1994a. I have registered a few doubts in Bett 1996: sec. II.
35 Contrary to the opinion of the Loeb translator – see Bury 1936: 35, note b.

36 66-74 and 121-2 also share the same general strategy of deducing unwelcome conclusions from premises just used. But they are not referred to as παράβολαί, and do not exhibit the same precise formal structure as the ones I have cited.
37 On παράβολαί, their particular association with critiques of Zeno, and the importance of Alexinus, see Schofield 1983.

38 See Long 1990; Annas (forthcoming). Long 1990: n.5, has a very useful list of correspondences between *ND* III and the negative arguments in *M* IX, as well as a list of Stoic premises exploited, in typical Academic fashion, in Sextus’ negative arguments. David Sedley has recently argued that one passage in particular of the positive section, 88-110, gives us an especially clear insight into the methods of the early Stoics; see Sedley 2005.

39 See again n.21; on this section, see also Burneyat 1982. I agree with Burneyat that Sextus’ presentation is “relatively clear” and Cicero’s fuller version (*ND* III.43-52) “confused and garrulous”, despite preserving important information about what Carneades was up to (326-7); this is a rare case where *Against the Physicists* scores higher than another presentation of related material.

40 The conclusions of these arguments are sometimes compressed to “Therefore God is perishable; therefore God does not exist”. The link between these two claims is most explicit near the beginning – “but this goes against the common conception of him” (143) – but is repeated more briefly numerous times (e.g., 147, 151).

41 For example, courage is “knowledge of things that are terrible and not terrible and in between” (*M* IX.158); μεγαλοπρυγχία is “knowledge that makes one rise above circumstances” (161); and wisdom is “knowledge of things
that are good and bad and indifferent” (162). Cf. Stob. II.59,10-11, II.61,15-16, II.59.5-6 respectively. Again see n.5 in Long 1990.

The argument that God does not speak (178-9) might perhaps be classified in the same group.

In addition to the articles by Annas, Brunschwig, Burnyeat, Long and Sedley cited earlier (cf. nn.34, 38, 39), see section V, “Academic views and criticisms”, in Mansfeld 1999; Knuuttila & Sihvola 2000, esp. 127-32.

Betegh 2006: 637-8. See also Long 1990: 280. Long mentions, but does not clearly explain, the reference to safety.

This is suggested by Sihvola 2006: 96. Sihvola adds another possibility: “if the theory is supposed to support a certain form of religion but then gets refuted by argument, religion, too, loses credibility in the eyes of such a person who requires argumentative support for all her beliefs”. But philosophical theories about the nature of God usually seem too remote from the specifics of ordinary religion for this kind of attempt at, and failure of, support to arise.

This was suggested in an earlier version of Annas (forthcoming).

The γάρ with which the sentence about safety opens might seem to promise some help on this question, since it indicates that the reference to safety is somehow explanatory of a point mentioned in the previous sentence. Keimpe Algra suggested that the γάρ lends some support to an interpretation in terms of intellectual safety, since the previous sentence has previewed a particular type of intellectual engagement with the question of the existence of the gods. I fail to see this; the previous sentence alludes to the upcoming discussion of the existence of the gods, but it offers no clues on the spirit in which that discussion is to be undertaken. Thus the γάρ seems to suggest that the sceptic’s safety has something to do with his stance concerning the existence of the gods, but I cannot see what more can be gleaned from it. And this by itself is unhelpful; since Sextus is quite clear that most philosophers assert the existence of the gods, it is hard to see what advantage he is able to claim for himself over dogmatists as a group by “saying that there are gods”.

Sextus himself alludes to an inconsistency between the dogmatists’ theological beliefs and their ordinary religious practice (PH III.249). I thank Thomas Bénatouil for alerting me to this passage.

An exception is Sihvola 2006: 96, who criticizes Sextus for presupposing that “there is a direct relation between theory and religion”; only on some such assumption are the dogmatists “unsafe”. Sihvola does not pursue the idea that in that case the sceptic’s suspension of judgement should render him “unsafe” too. But this is perhaps because he holds that Sextus’ account of the relation between theory and ordinary life is unclear quite generally (88-9, and cf. Knuuttila and Sihvola 2000: 136-40). He may well be right; at any rate, as the remainder of my paper tries to illustrate, Sextus’ remarks about religion do not help to clarify that account.

For a recent account see Janko 2006 (48 on the term δήκος as applied to Socrates). On Socrates’ religious views see also Burnyeat 1997.

When Socrates in Aristophanes’ Clouds says “Gods aren’t current coin with us” (K.J. Dover’s translation of θεοὶ ἔμων νόμισμα’ οὐκ ἔστι, 247-8, in Dover 1970: 94), he is obviously saying something that the audience is supposed to take as an affront to ordinary attitudes. These words are perhaps a good example of the point about “atheism” just above; having made an apparently blanket statement dismissing belief in gods, he immediately goes on to introduce Strepsiades to the true story about the divine, namely that the Clouds are in charge. What he is really opposed to, then – as the term νόμισμα’ is surely meant to imply – are the prevailing νόμοι about gods. But this is clearly just as bad as if he believed in no gods at all.

Although, as I suggested at the end of section I, the frequency of his reminders, in the section on God, that he is not denying the gods’ existence may also be understood as a cautionary move. Again, suspension of judgement could perhaps be viewed as less offensive than either outright atheism or unconventional positive views about divinity.

I do not mean to suggest that Sextus was afraid of suffering the fate of Socrates. My point is just that he sees that his readers may take his sceptical procedure, applied to the question of the gods, as subversive of ordinary religion, and that his concern about this is supported by the way some earlier philosophical stances towards religion, including Socrates’, were received.

See Barnes 1997, esp. 84-6; Bailey 2002: 192-3.

Annas (forthcoming). I have discussed Annas’ view in a little more detail in Bett 2009. Another version is Sihvola 2006; see also Knuuttila and Sihvola 2000. But Sihvola’s version is not as clear. He talks (Sihvola 2006: 90) of the possibility of statements being “true in a religious sense” while being untrue in a literal or philosophical sense. But he also talks (95) of Aristotle accepting everyday religious practice while also holding that religious
mys lly means that this view is orthodox in contemporary scholarship; I simply cite it as an interpretation that, if

Purinton 2001, while disagreeing with Long and Sedley on important points, nonetheless agrees with them on the

central point that the Epicurean gods are not “observer-independent living things” (231, his emphasis). I do not

mean to suggest that this view is orthodox in contemporary scholarship; I simply cite it as an interpretation that, if


does not imply a theoretical context; quite the opposite. See also n.27.

This is also true of PH, although the section on God at the beginning of PH III does not include the point.

In the ethical part of PH III there is a discussion of inconsistencies in ethical and religious belief (218-32); and here
too the beliefs placed in conflict with one another are ordinary religious beliefs as well as philosophical beliefs about
God. The same applies to the ethical and religious “oppositions” in the tenth mode in PH I (145-63). I have not
otherwise mentioned these passages because they do not correspond with anything in Against the Physicists (or any
other portion of the longer work to which Against the Physicists belongs).

Sihvola 2006: 97 takes issue with Annas, claiming that a certain level of “autonomy”
can be found in the Judeo-Christian tradition as well. I find it hard to judge between these competing positions, in
part because it is often radically unclear what people who say they believe in God actually believe; on this see
Dennett 2006, chapter 8, “Belief in Belief”.

By contrast, as we saw, the allegations of impiety in PH III (9-12), like the whole of the section on God in
PH III, are addressed to the dogmatists. Note again (cf. n.26) that Sextus’ use of the word θεόλογος in Against the
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For brief discussion, and further references, see Obbink 1989: n.61 and accompanying text. This picture of
ancient pagan religion can no doubt be exaggerated – just as it is possible to exaggerate the element of doctrine, as
opposed to “orthopraxy”, in many branches of modern religion. It is also surely true that religion in Sextus’ time
differed in important ways from religion in the fifth century BC, which is the period about which claims concerning
the priority of practice are most often made. My point is simply that however broadly such claims properly apply,
they do not help Sextus (though they might seem tailor-made to do so), because his own conception of ordinary
religion is to a significant degree doctrinal; otherwise he could not include ordinary religion alongside philosophical
conceptions of the gods in the way that he does.

Might Sextus say “there are gods”, “the gods are provident”, etc., and intend these merely as claims about
how things appear to him? (This suggestion was made to me by Svarvar Hrafn Svarvarsson.) He does sometimes say
that he is using “is” to mean “appears” (PH I.135, 198, M XI.18), and he implies that this is common sceptical
practice. But, first, if this is what he is doing here, then he does not avoid the accusation of disingenuousness. For
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good reason to keep quiet about it; for signaling it would again expose him to the other objection, that he is not
really in tune with ordinary views – at least as he understands them. And so, while it is not impossible that this is
Sextus’ intention, it is not, in the end, a satisfactory response to the problem.

In this paragraph and the next I am in part responding to the adherents of the “autonomy” interpretation.

Annas (forthcoming) restricts the “autonomy” claim to ancient pagan religion, arguing that modern
monotheistic religions require their adherents to accept some of what she calls “theological” beliefs – that is, beliefs
about the real nature of God. Sihvola 2006: 97 takes issue with Annas, claiming that a certain level of “autonomy”
can be found in the Judeo-Christian tradition as well. I find it hard to judge between these competing positions, in
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Annas (forthcoming) takes Epicurus and Aristotle as support for a distinction between theological and religious
beliefs; Sihvola 2006 takes Aristotle and the author of the fragment usually called the Sisyphus fragment as support
for his version of autonomy. I agree with much of what they say, and have learned a lot from both. But I do not
agree that any of these authors accepts or relies on a distinction between types or levels of belief; in each case, the
particular mix of philosophical theories and attitudes to everyday religious practice can be made sense of without
reference to any such distinction. However, my main reason for introducing these other cases is to indicate that
none of them helps us to make sense of the particular mix of these things that we find in Sextus.

See Long & Sedley 1987: vol.1, commentary on section 23. This view is accepted by Obbink 1989. Purinton 2001, while disagreeing with Long and Sedley on important points, nonetheless agrees with them on the
central point that the Epicurean gods are not “observer-independent living things” (231, his emphasis). I do not
mean to suggest that this view is orthodox in contemporary scholarship; I simply cite it as an interpretation that, if
correct, would place Epicurus strikingly at odds with ordinary views, but that does nothing to call into question the rationality of his adherence to ordinary religious practice.

64 As pointed out by Annas (forthcoming).
65 Sihvola 2006: 91 tentatively ascribes to the author (it should perhaps have been the character in whose mouth the words of the fragment are put) the view “that the religious stories are myths, i.e. untrue in a literal sense but perhaps true in a special religious sense”. I see no basis for the last part of this; the fragment simply says that they are false. It is useful that people believe in them, but that fact has no tendency to support their truth, whether in a special sense or in a normal one. On the difficulty of pinning down what the author is doing in this fragment, see Bett 2002: 251-4.
66 On this see Penelhum 1983, esp. 304-5.
67 See Clarke 1972.
68 Most of the important essays on this subject are collected in Burnyeat & Frede 1997. See also Brennan 2000 and Perin 2010.
69 This paper has benefited greatly from comments at the 2007 Symposium Hellenisticum conference. In addition to those mentioned in footnotes above, I am particularly indebted to Julia Annas, Myles Burnyeat, Michael Frede, Jim Hankinson, Brad Inwood and David Sedley. I also thank Julia Annas for helpful comments on an earlier related paper, as well as audiences at the University of Iceland and the University of North Carolina-Wilmington, where that paper was presented; and Malcolm Schofield for valuable advice prior to the conference about the relative strength of the various components of my case for a developmental picture of Pyrrhonism. In addition, I thank an anonymous reader for CUP, as well as the editors, Keimpe Algra and Katerina Ierodiakonou, for comments at the final stage that prompted a number of improvements. Finally, I thank Acumen Publishing for permission to reuse material from about seven paragraphs of Bett 2009.