

Can We Be Ancient Sceptics?

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1. Outline of the Project

No one today is a full-blown Aristotelian or Platonist. Of course, many people would be prepared to claim certain influences from Aristotle or Plato. But there is a great deal in the outlooks of both that is just no longer believable. Nor do I mean to suggest that this is a new phenomenon; even the Platonists of late antiquity, for example, did not take on board *all* of what they found in Plato. When you put forward definite views¹, you run the risk of even the sympathetic in later generations dismissing them, because of the advance of knowledge, changes in intellectual fashion, or various other developments.

But what about a philosophical outlook that professes to have no intellectual commitments? This, in broad outline, is the situation of the skeptics of the ancient Greco-Roman world. If definite views got Aristotle and Plato into trouble with the march of history, could one perhaps escape this fate by avoiding definite views altogether? This is what I would like to explore in this paper: whether, or in what respects, the skepticism advanced in the ancient period might still be viable today.

Ancient skepticism comes in a number of different varieties. There is a broad division between the Academic and Pyrrhonian traditions, and within each of these traditions there is evidence of considerable development over time. Since with one

¹ Along with most but not all interpreters of Plato, I assume that many of the views discussed in Plato's dialogues are views that Plato himself held – no doubt with varying degrees of confidence, and always with a willingness to rethink, but with some level of acceptance nonetheless. Anyone who disagrees can simply ignore the case of Plato.

exception the thinkers in question are known to us through fragments and second-hand, often critical reports, it is not surprising that many questions of interpretation in this area remain controversial. On this occasion I would like to avoid such scholarly intricacies, concentrating on the one exception, Sextus Empiricus, the Pyrrhonist skeptic whose writings have survived in considerable bulk. I shall also ignore questions concerning differences and possible developments *within* the surviving work of Sextus, limiting myself to the skepticism explicitly presented in book 1 of his best-known work, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, and on view in the rest of that work and at least substantial portions of his other works. The question, then, is to what extent a skeptical outlook recognizably akin to that of Sextus, as revealed by these writings, could still reasonably be adopted by someone today.

As is well known, Sextus' skepticism has two interrelated dimensions. There is the part where one constructs oppositions, leading to suspension of judgement, and there is the practical effect of this. On the one hand, then, one considers what can be said for and against various conclusions. Sextus offers no explicit limit on the subjects of these conclusions; in his one-sentence thumbnail sketch of skepticism near the beginning of *PH* (1.8), he says that they may apply to "things that appear and things that are thought in any way whatever". To judge from his own works, they at least include topics within the three standard areas of philosophy – logic, physics and ethics – as well as other areas of specialized intellectual expertise: grammar, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astrology and music². In any case, Sextus

² Logic, physics and ethics are examined in *PH* 2 and 3 and, at much greater length, in *Against the Logicians*, *Against the Physicists* and *Against the Ethicists* (collectively referred to as *Adversus Mathematicos* 7-11, or *M* 7-11 for short). The six specialized

assembles a huge variety of what in *PH* 1.8 he calls “opposing objects and accounts” in these areas. The “oppositions” are very often arrived at by means of intricate philosophical argumentation, either summarized from other philosophers or devised by the skeptics themselves; however, they sometimes also consist in, or rely on, ordinary common-sense impressions on some topic (for example, the existence of motion – *PH* 3.65-6, *M* 10.62, 66-8, 168). Now, the effect of all this juxtaposing of conflicting arguments and impressions is that one suspends judgement on the topics in question. This is because they have the feature of “equal strength” (ἰσοσθένεια); that is, on being faced with the two or more opposing positions on some topic, one is no more inclined to accept any one of them than any other – they balance each other in terms of their tendency to convince one. How this works in detail is a complicated question, to which I shall return in the next section. But Sextus says that the production of these oppositions comes about because of the skeptic’s “ability” (δύναμις), and it is a reasonable assumption that this includes the ability to make them have “equal strength”.

This, then, is what I shall call the oppositional dimension of Sextus’ skepticism; one is led to suspend judgement on (at least) the claims advanced in philosophy – in the ancient understanding of the term in which it includes the more fundamental aspects of natural science – and numerous other disciplines, because of the oppositions generated between or among these claims³. The practical

fields are those covered in Sextus’ third surviving work, *Adversus Mathematicos* 1-6. At the start of *M* (1.7), Sextus implies that there is a rationale for the choice of these six fields; unfortunately he does not tell us what it is.

³ Some scholars think that the skeptic also suspends judgement (in some sense) about everyday beliefs – in fact, about all beliefs whatever. In this case, this side of

dimension is the effect that Sextus supposes this to have. The final component in the thumbnail sketch at *PH* 1.8 is that suspending judgement results in ἀταραξία, tranquility or freedom from worry. Elsewhere in the opening chapters of *PH* 1 he tells us that the skeptic started out seeking ἀταραξία through the discovery of the truth; he is troubled by conflicting appearances of things and wishes to eliminate this trouble by figuring out which of these appearances are true and which false (1.12, 26). But finding himself unable to get beyond the conflict, he suspends judgement, and it turns out that this itself produces the ἀταραξία he had been seeking by another means. It sounds, then – although Sextus does not elaborate on this story – as if the initial trouble comes from not knowing how things are; one cares greatly about settling the pervasive conflicts in our views and impressions of things, and one has so far failed to do so. But this initial motivation is lost when one suspends judgement; it simply ceases to matter which of the conflicting appearances is true. Perhaps this is because previously one was strongly inclined to favor some views and impressions over others, but was uncomfortably aware that the presence of conflicting views or impressions, equally strongly supported by others, meant that one could not simply rest content with one's own perspective; once one comes

the skeptic's activity may be less theory-oriented than I have made it sound. (Although not necessarily, since on some versions of this reading, the route to suspension of judgement about everyday matters is through consideration of the possible forms of theoretical support they might be given.) For a variety of perspectives on this see Burnyeat & Frede 1997, Brennan 1994, Perin 2010a. While I find this a very difficult matter to assess, it is at least clear that Sextus' own focus in his writings is almost entirely on the kinds of claims made by philosophers and other theorists; and this provides some justification for restricting our attention to whether, or how far, there might be a counterpart skeptical activity today that focused on broadly theoretical questions.

to suspend judgement, one loses both the inclination to favor one side and the discomfort associated with the presence of the other side.

While this is an intelligible account, apparently suggested by the remarks I have summarized, it is not, as I say, an account that Sextus explicitly develops. However, he does in several places discuss why the skeptic has ἀταραξία and the non-skeptic does not, and here a somewhat different picture emerges (*PH* 1.27-30, 3.235-8, *M* 11.110-67). The idea is that a commitment to certain things being, in their real nature, good and others bad leads to tremendous turmoil; one is desperate to get or to retain the good things and to avoid or rid oneself of the bad things. This commitment to things being by nature good and bad is associated by Sextus both with non-skeptical philosophers and with ordinary people (*PH* 1.30). But the skeptic, of course, lacks any such commitment, and is therefore free of an immense source of distress. Sextus apparently sees no conflict between this account and the one suggested by the remarks about the abandonment of the search for truth, since at one point he interweaves them both in the same passage (*PH* 1.26-30); and indeed, there is no reason why one could not accept both of them simultaneously. However, they do seem to point in very different directions; one concerns one's attitude towards discovering, or failing to discover, the truth, whereas the other concerns the emotional effects of holding, or not holding, certain specific beliefs – whether or not they are true⁴. It is unfortunate, then, that Sextus never says

⁴ This last point is important. Sextus' claim is that believing that certain things are by nature good and others by nature bad is a source of distress. The truth or otherwise of these beliefs, or whether or not they are justified, has nothing to do with it; for example, worries about whether one might be *mistaken* in these beliefs – which might have formed a link between this line of thought and the other one –

anything to help clarify the relation between them. However, if we are trying to assess how much of Sextus' outlook could still be taken seriously today, there is no harm in separating them. In the past I have said some things about the plausibility of the second picture, the one centered around good and bad⁵. On this occasion, I will leave that aside and will say something about the first picture; this will be the topic of the final section.

Until then, I will concentrate on what I have called the oppositional side of Sextus' skepticism – that is, the production of suspension of judgement – and to what extent it might be a viable project today. As a first step towards that discussion, we need to look more closely at one aspect of Sextus' procedure.

2. How to Understand “Equal Strength”

How are we to understand Sextus' statement that the opposing arguments and impressions assembled by the skeptic have *ισοσθένεια*, “equal strength”? One way to interpret it is that one judges the opposing positions to be of equal rational merit, and one suspends judgement because one draws the conclusion that one ought rationally to do so⁶. Another is in purely psychological terms. Here it is not that one judges the opposing positions to be of equal rational merit, and one does not draw a conclusion to the effect that suspension of judgement is rationally required. Rather, one simply finds oneself equally inclined or disinclined towards either side (or every side) of the case, and given that situation, one finds oneself declining to assent

plays no role at all in the discussion. The problem is simply the *holding* of the beliefs.

⁵ See Bett 2011a, also Bett 2010 and Bett 2013.

⁶ For a detailed recent development of this sort of reading, see Perin 2010b, chapter 2. See also Vogt 2012, chapter 5.3.

to any of the alternatives. Of course, since a great many of the opposing positions are supported by arguments⁷, one's engagement with these arguments, in virtue of the rational capacities that one has developed as part of one's normal upbringing and perhaps also through philosophical training, will generally be part of the explanation for one's arriving at this state of equal inclination or disinclination. But this state is not itself one of taking there to be equally good reasons on each side; it is a state of feeling pulled with equal force towards or against each side, and that is all⁸. In the past I have favored this second reading, and I still think that it makes the best sense of the main bulk of Sextus' text. Attributing to Sextus commitments concerning what is rational seems itself to be in conflict with the suspension of judgement that he professes⁹; I prefer to read the skeptic's susceptibility to rational argument – and, as I said, this is certainly a very important part of how the opposing positions affect him – as a brute fact about him and the influences upon him, rather than anything he endorses. But Sextus' frequent talk of the *necessity* of suspending judgement is at times hard not to read as referring to rational necessity, a necessity imposed by the merit of the arguments. This is particularly true when it comes to

⁷ Many, but not all. As I said, among the opposing positions are also simple everyday observations, such as that things move.

⁸ See, e.g., Williams 1988, 555-6. See also n.10.

⁹ Perin 2010b, 42-4 considers this objection, but his reply to it – treating Sextus' attitude towards reasons for belief as something that merely *appears* to him, not as itself the content of a belief – seems to me unconvincing; I do not see how to understand an attitude about reasons for belief as a mere non-doxastic seeming. On this Myles Burnyeat's argument in Burnyeat 1997 (53-7) still seems to me right. Burnyeat presents this as an objection to Sextus, but I would prefer to take it as a reason to avoid, if possible, any reading of Sextus that involves him in attitudes towards what *should* or *should not* be believed. As I go on to say, however, I am no longer convinced that this is entirely possible.

the groups of standardized arguments known as the Modes (*PH* 1.35-179)¹⁰. In what follows I shall generally try to remain neutral between these two interpretations, although on occasion it will make a difference which we adopt.

Either way, the idea that the opposing sides have “equal strength” is still in need of explanation. As noted earlier, I think that this has to be connected with the reference to the skeptic’s “ability”. The skeptic is someone who is *very good* at bringing about these oppositions, including the “equal strength” that they are said to possess. How should we read this? On either interpretation, the skeptic is someone with an expertise at lining up the cases on each side of some issue so as to make them equally attractive – to the listener or to himself. On the psychological interpretation there are no inherent limitations on how the opposing positions are made equally attractive to their intended audience; on the rationalist interpretation, it is due to the fact that the grounds produced for each position are rationally compelling to the same degree. But either way, in order for this situation of “equal strength” to be produced on *every issue* considered, one may well feel that there is liable to be a considerable element of manipulation. The skeptic may *bring it about* that one is equally persuaded (rationally or otherwise) by either side, but it is natural to suspect that in some cases this is bound to be a contrived result. That is to say, in order to get “equal strength”, some considerations will need to be deliberately suppressed and others played up; any normal person in the same intellectual context who was investigating the issue *without* suspension of

¹⁰ See Bett 2011b. Here I illustrate why the Modes are hard to fit with the psychological interpretation, while also expressing a general preference for that interpretation.

judgement as a goal would find the considerations on either side quite imbalanced, and exceptional effort is therefore required to make them strike someone as equal. This is especially problematic, of course, if the person in whom suspension of judgement is supposed to be induced is oneself – which, as Sextus makes clear, is part of the skeptic’s program (e.g., *PH* 1.31).

The way out of this would be for the skeptic to restrict his activity to areas where there is genuine room for uncertainty and where significant support can be offered on two or more sides of the question – relying perhaps on a combination of argumentation and ordinary experience or common sense, but without needing to force the issue in the way just suggested. In fact, while he would of course never claim to be certain about this, Sextus seems to proceed as if this is the case at least for all matters considered by philosophers and other theoreticians. This seems a large assumption even for his own day¹¹, which is why I have spent a little time on it; but, as we shall see, in at least one important instance it may have made more sense in the ancient context than today. In any case, whether it is realistic to expect that we could bring about a situation of “equal strength” will turn out to be an important test of how far a version of Sextus’ Pyrrhonism might be viable for us.

3. Suspension of Judgement Then and Now

¹¹ Vogt 2012, 130-1 suggests that what makes the expectation plausible that equal credibility will be achieved on each side is the skeptic’s “immersion into argument”. But it is not clear why involvement in argument makes “equal strength” more likely; we must be dealing with topics where the arguments are not overwhelmingly on one side, and I see no reason to expect that all topics will fit this description. In any case, as I noted, Sextus does not always rely on arguments to construct his oppositions; sometimes on one side he relies on ordinary experience.

To what extent, then, is suspension of judgement about theoretical matters viable today? There are a number of areas in which it still seems very much a live option. Ethics, political theory and religion are examples that spring as readily to mind as any. In all these areas, both in the academic and the popular arenas, there is pervasive disagreement, including on the question what it would take for consensus to be achieved. Of course, the terms of many debates have changed a great deal. For example, many contemporary philosophers regard ethical discourse as involving expressions of feeling rather than statements of fact. Sextus would have perceived this as undermining any positive ethical project, since he takes ethical thinkers, by definition, to believe that certain things are, in the nature of things, good and others bad. But nowadays such a non-cognitivist view of ethics is often understood as entirely compatible with the development of positive ethical theory; to name just a few, J. L. Mackie, R. M. Hare and Peter Singer have at various times espoused versions of the former while enthusiastically engaging in the latter¹². Again, modern religions are very different from the kind of religion with which Sextus was familiar, and this would surely affect the nature of the oppositions that might be constructed. But none of this alters the fact that in the subjects I have mentioned, the prospects for assembling equally powerful opposing arguments on a multitude of topics seem to remain just as good as ever.

The same might be said more generally of philosophy (in our modest contemporary understanding of the term). There are clearly any number of debates in metaphysics, philosophy of mind and other areas that are wide open, where

¹² Mackie 1977, Hare 1981, Singer 1979.

strongly held opposing positions are aired and where someone who was not already a party to one of these positions might easily find several of them equally persuasive. Among these other areas is epistemology, where philosophers can be found who actually call themselves Pyrrhonists or Pyrrhonians, the most prominent being Robert Fogelin¹³. I have chosen not to emphasize this neo-Pyrrhonism because it actually seems to me very different from Pyrrhonism of the ancient variety. First, it is restricted to epistemology, being largely centered around the Five Modes of Agrippa, which together argue that rational justification is impossible; this is just one small corner of Pyrrhonism as understood by Sextus. Second, it appears to me to *endorse* the conclusion of the Five Modes, rather than suspending judgement about it, and hence not to qualify as skeptical, in the ancient sense, at all¹⁴. However, suspension of judgement about theories of justification, including about whether any of them can succeed, is surely one possible outcome in epistemology, just as suspension of judgement is clearly possible in much of philosophy¹⁵.

¹³ See Fogelin 1994, and for discussion of Fogelin's ideas, Sinnott-Armstrong 2004.

¹⁴ How to interpret the Modes in Sextus himself is not obvious, precisely because they give the impression of arguing for a definite conclusion. Michael Williams has proposed that the Modes' negative conclusion is itself to be juxtaposed with the positive epistemologies of other philosophers, leading to suspension of judgement; see Williams 2010 and 1988. I am not convinced that this can be made to fit the text, but I agree that some such move would be necessary in order for Sextus to be consistent.

¹⁵ While writing this paper, I received an email advertisement for a volume called *Current Controversies in Epistemology* (Neta 2014). Sometimes it seems as if publishers and editors in philosophy design their collections with the specific goal of making suspension of judgement more likely (and not only in epistemology). At any rate, the prevalence of such volumes testifies to the fact that suspension of judgement is often a reasonable option.

A would-be contemporary skeptic attempting to follow Sextus' model would therefore find plenty of material to work on. But there are limits to how far this could go. In the case of the natural sciences, in particular, a somewhat different picture emerges. It is not that there is no room for suspension of judgement on questions concerning science; far from it, as we shall see, and in some cases the questions are ones that would not have occurred to Sextus. However, many other questions do not admit of this treatment. The contrast with the ancient period in this case is significant enough, and complicated enough, that I shall devote most of the rest of this section to it.

One fundamental point that I have in mind here is simply the *success* of modern science. In the ancient world basic scientific questions were almost entirely up for genuine debate. For example, is matter atomic, or is it continuous and potentially divisible at any point whatever? Each of these positions had its proponents, who brought forward arguments for them, and there was no clear prospect of settling the dispute in a way that would generally be deemed conclusive. Part of the reason may have been the absence of experimental techniques that could be thought to serve as a neutral basis for decision; abstract argument was really the only means to support either position, and the abstract arguments on both sides were sophisticated. This situation naturally created a favorable climate for the Pyrrhonist procedure of assembling oppositions of "equal strength". Today's atomic theory, however, is just not open to challenge. Of course, important inquiry continues, at the Large Hadron Collider and elsewhere; I do not wish to deny that a great many questions remain unresolved. But there is a huge, systematic body of

findings in this area, supported by massive evidence, that are not subject to equally plausible opposing arguments. The periodic table, for instance, is not up for debate, except at the margins¹⁶.

The success of modern science has also seeped into our lives, and this is another reason why suspending judgement about its results is no longer an option, except in certain limited cases. We have electricity, plastic, antibiotics, radar – to stick just with old-fashioned examples – because of various scientific breakthroughs of the past. Unless we are embarking on some radical post-Cartesian skepticism about the external world in general¹⁷, there is no room for questioning the existence of these items themselves or their scientific provenance. Sextus often seems to assume a sharp division between the activities of daily life and the activities of theorists; what ordinary people do might be exactly the same, even if the theorists had never engaged in their projects¹⁸. While there may still be theoretical subjects of which that is true, the natural sciences are not among them; and this just reinforces the conclusion that a great deal of modern scientific theory is not a possible subject for a contemporary version of Sextus' skepticism.

The last two paragraphs may have sounded one-sided and even complacent. It is now time to introduce some other sides to the story. Without retracting

¹⁶ Or perhaps I should say “the identity of the elements listed in the periodic table”. There have in fact been many different versions of the table itself, reflecting different people's views about how best to structure the scheme of elements so as to best exhibit their salient relations with one another. But there is a body of knowledge, not up for dispute except at the margins, about what these elements are.

¹⁷ On the fact that skepticism about the external world is alien to Sextus' approach, see most recently Williams 2010.

¹⁸ This is not to deny that the conclusions of some theorists might overlap with what people say in ordinary life – for example, as we noted earlier, on the existence of motion.

anything I have said, I shall now offer two complications: first, the public questioning of a number of important scientific results, and second, modern philosophical reflection on the nature of the scientific enterprise. In both these areas, suspension of judgement relating to science can and probably does exist.

One occasionally hears of extreme cases of the rejection of science – of people who refuse to trust any of modern medicine¹⁹, for example, allowing their children to die rather than taking them for well-established medical procedures. In such cases it is hard to see how suspension of judgement could get started. One might be in the grip of an anti-modern world-view that dictated the rejection of medicine; or one might belong to the great majority who rely when needed on pharmaceuticals, surgery, etc (not to mention automobiles, electricity, etc.). It is hard to imagine a frame of mind in which these global alternatives might strike someone as *equally* persuasive; if this is possible, it is surely extremely rare (and when it does occur, perhaps temporary, during a process of conversion from one to the other).

However, there are numerous cases where one can find an overwhelming scientific consensus, coupled with widespread popular disbelief about it, and this is more significant. The disbelievers have not in general rejected the modern world and its dependence on scientific results; but on certain topics that are matters of vociferous public debate, they find the scientific picture difficult or impossible to accept.

¹⁹ I mean, who refuse to believe that modern medical procedures really work or have a solid basis. As distinct from this, there are many ethical or political reasons why someone might abjure certain technologies, without questioning the truth of the scientific theories that led to their development. Also, to be clear, I am not denying that a great many medical procedures are experimental and open to question; I am speaking here of matters like the use of pharmaceuticals to cure simple infections.

Climate change and (at least in the United States) evolution are prominent examples²⁰. So could there be equally powerful opposing positions on either side of these issues?

I think the answer is that it depends what “power” amounts to, and this brings us back to the psychological versus the rationalist interpretations of “equal strength”. On the rationalist interpretation, there would need to be equally good reasons produced against the existence of evolution and climate change and for their existence. In the current state of understanding of these issues, it seems very unlikely that this could be done²¹. On the psychological interpretation, however, one merely needs to be brought to a state of equal inclination for and against, regardless of how this is done. And in some parts of the world in the present day, it seems quite possible that someone could be brought into this state. For someone who was not a scientist, the scientific consensus on the one side, combined with the sheer loud noise of opposition on the other, might bring someone to be no more

²⁰ A number of other examples are discussed in Oreskes and Conway 2010. The goal of this work is anything but suspensive; it intends to expose the fraud that has made these issues matters of debate when they should be considered settled. But the various cases they discuss seem amenable to the kind of picture I am developing here. Thanks to Stéphane Marchand for drawing my attention to the relevance of this work.

²¹ I assume that the anti-evolution and anti-climate change positions are fueled by prejudice rather than any good reasons, coupled with, in the first case, a naïve conception of the relations between science and religion and, in the second, short-term political and economic interests in certain sectors of society (again see Oreskes and Conway 2010). If so, even if we accept that what count as good reasons can vary with the context of the debate and the mindset of the persons involved in it, it seems hard to imagine that equally good reasons could be produced on both sides of these issues. Of course, I am speaking of the broad propositions that evolution and human-induced climate change are real; as in any other areas of science, there is much uncertainty and genuine debate on matters of detail.

inclined in one direction than the other, and hence to suspend judgement about one or other of these issues.

In certain cases, then, a widely and vocally held opinion *about* a scientific question might itself affect whether suspension of judgement on that question was feasible. There need not be anything surprising here. As I have indicated, Sextus sometimes brings everyday opinions about things – on the existence of god, to take a new example – into the mix of opposing views having “equal strength”; and on either interpretation of “equal strength”, the feasibility of suspension of judgement will depend on the argumentative context, state of knowledge, and other factors particular to the intellectual environment in which our potential skeptic is situated. The skeptic’s “ability” needs to be flexible and to adapt itself to the nature of the disputes prevailing in a given time and place. Of course, accepting that skepticism about evolution or climate change is, in at least some circumstances, possible tells us nothing about why it might be desirable; we shall return to this issue at the end. For now, I simply observe that the success of modern science does not necessarily preclude skepticism in those cases in which science and public opinion conflict; and these cases are often important. I cannot think of a case in Sextus that is clearly of this kind; he perhaps comes closest to it in his Tenth Mode, where some of the examples involve a conflict between mythical beliefs and dogmatic suppositions (*PH* 1.161). But a conflict between science and religion was certainly possible in the ancient world – Aristophanes’ *Clouds* provides a prominent illustration – and these cases (again, at least if we follow the psychological interpretation of “equal strength”) do not seem alien to Sextus’ spirit.

I come now to my second “complication”. Although much of modern science is settled, in a way that ancient science never was, there is by no means a philosophical consensus on what scientific success is. In the ancient world it was assumed that what science – or “physics”, as it was then called – was supposed to do was to capture the way things objectively are in the world independent of us. This is an important aspect of what Myles Burnyeat has called the “unquestioned, unquestioning *assumption* of realism” in ancient Greek thought²². Of course, not everyone thought that this was possible, the skeptics themselves being among the most prominent to challenge any pretensions to have pinned down the objective state of things. But to the extent that such challenges were found convincing, this was counted as a failure for science; neither the skeptics nor anyone else questioned the realist conception of *what it would be like* for science to succeed²³. Now, however, things are different. While scientific realism is still a respectable position – indeed, one of the main contenders – there are numerous other alternatives. For a period in the mid-twentieth century, verificationism was one; and while the strict verificationist program was not taken seriously for long, it has been supplanted by numerous more sophisticated forms of empiricism, relativism, constructivism and

²² Burnyeat 1982, 33. I have discussed this point in greater detail in Bett forthcoming, section 2.

²³ If realism is understood as the view that reality is independent of us and we are capable of, or have succeeded in, understanding it, then a skeptic is of course not a realist. But if realism is the view that reality is independent of us and that success in understanding it *would* consist in grasping the nature of this independent reality, then Sextus is a realist; for him, the project at which the dogmatists have tried and (at least so far) failed is that of pinning down the ὑποκείμενα, the “underlying things”.

instrumentalism. Exploring these views is well beyond the scope of this paper²⁴. But the central point is that on any of these views, contrary to realism, what counts as true, in science and perhaps in other fields, is determined in part by something about us: by what we can observe, by the theory-laden character of our observations, by the perspectives we bring to the inquiry, by the interests the research is intended to serve, and so on.

This disagreement in the philosophy of science – a variety of opinions at the meta-level, so to speak, of which there is no counterpart in the ancient world – has two consequences for our topic. First, given this difference in ancient and modern approaches, many of the non-realist positions in contemporary philosophy of science would have seemed to Sextus like grist for the skeptic’s mill. Arguments to the effect that scientific theories, even the best ones, are shaped by features of our own outlooks, rather than being faithful descriptions of an entirely independent reality, would have come across to him not as ways of characterizing science’s legitimate procedures, but as ways of *undermining* science’s credentials – precisely the kind of thing a skeptic might well want to engage in as part of a strategy for producing suspension of judgement about its legitimacy or feasibility. Sextus is very well aware that features of the perceiver may affect how things are perceived; but he sees this as a route towards doubting whether we are in a position to grasp how things really are – this is the whole point of the subgroup of Ten Modes centered on the perceiving subject (the first four, according to him, *PH* 1.38). The idea that how the world is might in part be *constituted* by our ways of seeing it does not occur to

²⁴ For a brief introduction and a guide to further reading, see Sidelle 2006 and Psillos 2006.

him. Thus, although skepticism about particular scientific theories may be off the table in a great many cases, skepticism about the scientific enterprise in general – whether it can do what it purports to do – might well have struck Sextus himself, were he to be transported to our time, as highly attractive.

Second, this array of different positions about the nature of science opens the possibility of a contemporary application of the Pyrrhonist program to this disagreement itself. There are arguments for and against all these opposing positions about what it is that science is doing; one can imagine someone finding – or bringing it about in the ways that the skeptic’s “ability” makes possible – that these arguments for and against the various alternatives are equally powerful (again, bearing in mind that “powerful” can be understood in different ways), and therefore suspending judgement about science’s nature and goal²⁵. As noted above, this is not something Sextus himself does, because like ancient philosophers in general, he does not seem to conceive of any alternatives to realism. But as far as I can see, that is a contingent fact not intrinsically related to the character of Pyrrhonism itself, and so I see no reason why a Pyrrhonist of the present day could not suspend judgement on this central issue in the philosophy of science. Here, then, if a contemporary skepticism about science is in one way closed off, as I argued earlier, it is made possible in another way that Sextus himself could not have

²⁵ This would not be suspension of judgement about *whether* there can be successful science (as in the previous paragraph), but suspension of judgement about *what* science is up to. One could imagine various ways in which the latter might lead to the former, but that would be a separate matter.

imagined. The periodic table may no longer be up for debate; but we can now debate how to *conceive* the kind of thing the periodic table is²⁶.

Now, obviously, there are topics in fields other than philosophy or the natural sciences on which unresolved debate exists, and where the possibility of suspension of judgement therefore arises²⁷; but we cannot attempt to survey the entire field of human inquiry. How are we to sum up this discussion? We have seen that there some subjects on which suspension of judgement now seems to be a realistic option, but which would not have occurred to Sextus himself. At least as important, though, is that there are large areas of inquiry the ancient counterparts of which Sextus understandably could regard as open to skeptical treatment, but that we can no longer regard as such. And for this reason the idea of a comprehensive suspension of judgement about *all* matters of theoretical inquiry, which seems to be central to Sextus' conception, is no longer a realistic option.

Suspension of judgement is still possible about a great many things. But it is

²⁶ Both editors also stressed to me that many practising scientists today have a pragmatic attitude towards what they are doing; they are not really concerned with the nature of reality, but with what *works*, with the *effects* that can be brought about in the world. I agree, and so we could also imagine a debate – possibly with suspension of judgement as the outcome – about whether one should *care about* what precisely science is doing. I take science to be concerned at least to some degree with explanation, and so I would not want to blur the line entirely between the scientist and the technician. For the same reason, Sextus' acceptance of some τέχναι (*PH* 1.24), most notably medicine, does not seem to me to make him a kind of pragmatic scientist; for these τέχναι, as I understand him, deliberately avoid any explanatory component. However, as far as I can see, nothing in the picture I have developed depends on these points.

²⁷ But here too, there are a great many matters in such fields that are *not* up for debate. For example, there is a large body of knowledge in comparative philology concerning the relations among the Indo-European languages. In *Against the Grammarians* Sextus plays havoc with the grammarians over etymology (*M* 1.241-7); he could not get away with this kind of approach today.

possible, when it is, on a case-by-case basis, for reasons particular to the issue or area in question, not as part of a global skeptical agenda²⁸.

The remaining question is, what would be the point, or the payoff, of suspending judgement, in the areas in which it is a realistic option? I close with some reflections on this question.

4. Skeptical Tranquility, and What is Left if we Abandon it

Suspension of judgement may often be an intellectually respectable attitude; on some topics, it may be *the only* intellectually respectable attitude²⁹. It can help to guard against premature conclusions, to avoid entrenched dogmatisms, and to prevent us from being over-confident that we have plumbed the depths of reality.

²⁸ In a seminal paper some thirty years ago Julia Annas argued that “Modern moral scepticism is essentially local” (Annas 1986, 17). My approach here is somewhat different from Annas’; I am considering how far Sextus’ skepticism might be viable today (on any topic), whereas she was comparing his skepticism with what is now called skepticism in ethics. However, I think we are in fundamental agreement that skepticism today, of whatever form, is bound to be a piecemeal affair.

²⁹ In speaking of intellectual respectability, I may seem to be opting for what I called the rationalist interpretation of “equal strength”. But I do not think this is necessarily the case. First, as I observed, even on the psychological interpretation the skeptic’s “oppositional” activity is shaped to a large degree by his susceptibility to rational argument; it is simply that he regards this as a dispositional fact about himself rather than as his adoption of a set of norms. That would not prevent us, as outsiders, from describing what the skeptic does as intellectually respectable – to the extent that this is so. Second, when the skeptic relies for one side of the case – as we have seen that Sextus sometimes does – on the brute force of ordinary experience or common sense rather than on arguments, this is not necessarily a violation of intellectual respectability; it can sometimes be a sensible move to question how much weight should be given to arguments versus immediate impressions (G.E. Moore’s reaction to arguments challenging our knowledge of the external world is a good example: see Moore 1939), and this point seems neutral as between the psychological and the rationalist interpretations of skepticism. Third, as I noted earlier, Sextus’ professed procedure seems to risk being contrived, and hence *not* intellectually respectable, in many cases. But that is just as true whichever interpretation one adopts; whether we see him as presenting equally good reasons, or equally powerful psychological forces, the likelihood of periodic contrivance is just the same.

These points are obvious, but they are the kinds of reason why an element of skepticism in intellectual discourse is healthy.

But Sextus had in mind something much more ambitious than this. To recall, he spoke of a comprehensive *ability* to generate suspension of judgement; the skeptic is an expert at inducing suspension of judgement, even perhaps on occasions when it is *not* intellectually respectable by most people's lights. Why should one wish to push suspension of judgement as far as it can go? Sextus' answer, as we have seen, is that this results in ἀταραξία, tranquility. He sees a very intimate connection between tranquility and suspension of judgement; the sceptics found the former to follow the latter "as a shadow follows a body" (*PH* 1.29)³⁰. He does say that this happened τυχικῶς, "fortuitously" (*PH* 1.26, 29). But this must mean that it was unexpected the first time it occurred, not that in general it is something that happens randomly or unpredictably; bodies cast shadows whenever the sun is shining³¹, in repeatable patterns dictated by the sun's position. The shadow simile, then, makes clear that Sextus takes tranquility to follow suspension of judgement regularly and reliably. And this fits entirely with the confident and unequivocal way in which he speaks of tranquility as the effect of suspension of judgement, whenever he does speak of it. It is never suggested that this effect is intermittent or unpredictable; we are simply told that the one leads to the other – and, by contrast,

³⁰ The same simile is attributed in *DL* to some skeptics who gave suspension of judgement as the τέλος or goal of life (9.107). Although Sextus has tranquility, not suspension of judgement, as his τέλος (*PH* 1.25), there may be no significant disagreement, given the common simile.

³¹ Which, in Mediterranean countries, it usually is; calling tranquility suspension of judgement's shadow is meant, precisely, to emphasize the closeness of the relation.

that failure to suspend judgement leads equally predictably to turmoil³². This, then, is why Sextus has an interest in maximizing his suspension of judgement; the result, he thinks, will be to maximize his tranquility. And one reason for this, the one on which I shall concentrate here, is that in suspending judgement on some topic, one is freed from the worries associated with a search for the truth about that topic that is incomplete, unsuccessful or in other ways less than definitive. Is this an idea that we can take seriously?

It seems to me that the answer is no, and that is because Sextus' oppositional activity is not, as he suggests, a reliable recipe for tranquility. One way to begin framing the issue is that there are obvious senses in which some topics matter far more than others. Some issues in philosophy are hard to see as having any importance beyond themselves; as an example let me stipulate mereology, the branch of metaphysics concerned with parts, wholes and their interrelations (those who disagree can simply substitute another). By contrast, many issues, in philosophy and elsewhere, clearly have significant consequences for our conception of ourselves and our place in the world: freedom and determinism, personal identity, the nature of rights and justice, the existence and nature of god, and the theory of evolution are a few cases that spring to mind. And some issues, such as climate change, may (depending on one's view of it) profoundly affect the future of life on earth, including the very survival of the human species and most others.

³² Both editors objected to my language of confidence, reliability, etc. in this context: is this not inconsistent with the Pyrrhonist program itself? I agree that this is a worry. But the worry is for Sextus, not for my interpretation of him. No doubt, if pressed, Sextus would say that he is not claiming tranquility as a *universal* effect of suspension of judgement. But what he actually says on the subject makes this hard to accept; he never gives any hint that there might be exceptions.

Now, assume that the topics we are dealing with, at any of these levels of importance, are subjects of genuine debate about which opposing positions are held, so that suspension of judgement is a realistic option. Is it the case that someone who suspends judgement about these topics will be more tranquil than someone actively involved in the debate – perhaps holding some definite position on the topic, but at any rate actively trying to reach a well-founded position? The answer is simply that it depends on these people's characters and circumstances – and this is true regardless of the perceived importance of the topic. One person might be highly engaged in mereology and highly frustrated at the state of debate in this area; compared with this person, someone who had come to see the opposing positions as equally strong, and had therefore suspended judgement about the whole topic, might well be calmer. But one can also imagine someone who came to this suspension of judgement as doing so in a state of great disappointment, feeling that he had wasted years of his life on these insoluble problems, or that it would have been so much more rewarding to have brought the debate to a firm conclusion; by contrast, a phlegmatic mereologist, who was engaged in the debates but did not take them or herself too seriously, might do better in terms of tranquility.

Similarly, agnosticism about the existence of god might be comforting for some – they are happy to give up worrying about such imponderable questions – but terrifying for others; when the answer matters so much, the latter might say, finding that the considerations on either side are equally powerful, and thus being forced to suspend judgement, is the worst possible outcome. Finally, on climate change, we may compare the scientist who is sure the effects of climate change are

real, and need serious and immediate action, with the skeptic who finds the voices (scientific and otherwise) for and against the existence of climate change equally powerful. The former might be desperately scared about the world's future, and the latter unconcerned because of not having a firm view about this³³. But one can also imagine the former immersed in the project of saving the world and comfortable that she was at least doing everything in her power, and the latter paralyzed and confused by the thought that climate change *might or might not* be happening; after all, if it is happening, major changes of lifestyle will be necessary for much of the world, but if it is not happening, these changes, which many would regard as thoroughly disruptive, would all be for naught – so what are we to do?

Sextus' answer to this last question would be that a skeptic will do what his background and culture have trained him to do (*M* 11.165-6, *PH* 1.23-4). This has a certain sense in much of ordinary life, but in situations of potentially radical change, it is at its least helpful. Sextus would also say that a skeptic will have suspended judgement, and is therefore tranquil, about matters of good and bad, so that the question whether to embark on a major change of lifestyle will not seem so fraught as it does to my hypothetical climate-change skeptic. This takes us into the other set of reasons Sextus gives for why the skeptic is more tranquil than the non-sceptic, reasons especially centered on good and bad. As noted earlier, I have discussed this subject elsewhere, and there is not space to consider it here. I will simply say that a similar account seems to me plausible concerning suspension of judgement about good and bad as concerning suspension of judgement in general; sometimes it will

³³ Also, perhaps, because of not being overly concerned about the future of the world beyond his own lifetime; some people care about this more than others.

make a person more tranquil, sometimes less so – it all depends on the circumstances and the personalities involved.

I have drawn attention to numerous differences between the intellectual contexts of Sextus and ourselves. But this last point, that suspension of judgement does not have an especially close connection with tranquility, is not, as far as I can see, dependent on particular features of the contemporary world; Sextus' confidence that tranquility results from suspension of judgement seems ill-advised even for his own time. Some scholars regard tranquility as an inessential feature of Sextus' skepticism³⁴. I think they have a point, but it is a point about what Sextus *should* say, not about what he does say – he himself seems to attach great importance to it³⁵. In any case, if we are trying to assess the extent to which Sextus' form of skepticism might still be viable today, we would do best to ignore its practical side as he presents it.

Without the practical side, the oppositional side becomes less momentous than Sextus makes it look; but it does not shrivel up entirely. I argued in the previous section that the idea of *universal* suspension of judgement is no longer open to us. But if we give up the idea of a link between suspension of judgement and tranquility, there is in any case no incentive to push for suspension of judgement in all possible circumstances. It may be true, as I have suggested, that in certain times and places one *could* bring about suspension of judgement about

³⁴ See, e.g. Machuca 2006.

³⁵ Of course, one might also question whether tranquility per se is such a great benefit; might there not be other things in life worth caring about more? Gisela Striker, among others, has pressed this objection; see Striker 2004, 22, Striker 2010, 196.

climate change. But if there is no more reason to expect tranquility to result than its opposite, the motivation for doing so disappears. And the same is true of any case where “equal strength” can only be produced in a manner that is, as I put it earlier, contrived. Of course, other motivations might be found. But Sextus offers no suggestion as to what they might be, and for me, at least, it is hard to see the merit of suspension of judgement in circumstances like these. What we are left with, it seems to me, is a recommendation to do one’s best to consider all sides of an issue, to see how forceful they are and how well they can be supported or opposed, together with a prediction having some promise – that this process will often lead one to suspend judgement rather than coming down on one side or the other. As I suggested at the beginning of this section, there may well be some worthwhile consequences to following this recommendation and reaching this result – even if they are not the ones that Sextus himself describes³⁶.

³⁶ I thank the editors, Diego Machuca and Stéphane Marchand, for exceptionally helpful comments on a previous version of this paper. I suspect that they will still find much here with which to disagree. But in pushing me to clarify or modify a number of points, they have made the paper much better than it was.

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