From the perspective of contemporary philosophy, the idea of *living as a sceptic* sounds distinctly odd. For one thing, very few philosophers today identify themselves as sceptics; scepticism is normally seen as a threat to be combated, not as a position to be embraced. Even someone who comes to think that scepticism about, say, our knowledge of the external world is not defeated by any of the lines of argument so far brought against it does not thereby conclude that scepticism is correct. On the contrary, the lesson to be drawn may be that we need to work harder to diagnose how the (presumably erroneous) sceptical way of thinking gets started, or to analyze the relations between scepticism at the philosophical level and our ordinary practices of gathering and assessing knowledge – which are assumed to be in order, despite the apparent power of the sceptical arguments\(^1\).

But second, even those few who do profess some variety of scepticism do not seem to consider the possibility that this might be the basis for a distinctive form of life. At the beginning and the end of his book *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*\(^2\), Peter Unger suggests that his sceptical arguments in epistemology call for a reshaping of our view of things: we need either to replace, or rethink the meanings of, terms such as “know” and “truth”, terms that incorporate assumptions concerning our grasp of the world that cannot possibly be fulfilled. But this project is not actually embarked on, and in any case, no hints are offered as to how, if at all, this might affect one’s life.

---

1 I am thinking in particular of Stroud 1984.
2 Unger 1975.
And something similar is true of moral scepticism. J.L. Mackie and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong have both argued for positions that they themselves characterized as moral scepticism\(^3\): in Mackie’s case, that there are no objective values, and in Sinnott-Armstrong’s, that moral nihilism – the view that nothing is right or wrong, good or bad, and so on – cannot be ruled out. But both of them insist that this does not make the sort of practical difference that one might have thought would follow; ordinary moral beliefs can be held on to as before, and can even be given certain sorts of justifications. Scepticism, it seems, can affect our theoretical view of ourselves, as knowers or as moral beings, but it makes no difference to how we actually go about our lives. It would be interesting to explore the reasons for this, but that would be beyond the scope of this paper\(^4\); everything I have said so far is designed to emphasize the contrast with scepticism in the ancient world, rather than to mark out a topic in its own right. I will simply add that we can also speak, in a non-philosophical way, about persons of a sceptical disposition, and it may be that an everyday scepticism of this sort is more suited to have a practical effect than scepticism in contemporary philosophy seems to have. I shall return to this point in closing.

In any case, ancient Greek scepticism was intended by its proponents to be lived – in this it was no different from other ancient Greek philosophies, at least those originating in the Hellenistic period – and it was assumed by others that its

\(^3\) Mackie 1977; Sinnott-Armstrong 2006.
\(^4\) Some have appealed in this context to a contemporary “insulation” of philosophy from ordinary life; on this especially Burnyeat 1997a. But however accurate it may be, this has more the air of a redescription than of an explanation. For some doubts about monolithic claims concerning “insulation”, see Bett 1993.
success as a philosophical outlook depended in part on its ability to be lived. This is why the various charges of *apraxia* leveled against scepticism – charges to the effect that a truly sceptical frame of mind would make it impossible to act – were taken very seriously by scepticism's critics and also by the sceptics themselves. In this paper I propose to give an account of what it means to live as a sceptic, and then to consider to what extent some version of this account might still be viable or worthwhile today.

The centerpiece of ancient scepticism is suspension of judgement. This is clearly true of the Pyrrhonist sceptic Sextus Empiricus, the majority of whose extensive surviving writings consist of considerations for and against a great number of philosophical and other theoretical positions; these considerations are supposed to be evenly balanced, and the purported outcome is that one cannot but suspend judgement about the issue in question – one no longer takes a position either way. It looks as if versions of suspension of judgement – though not necessarily the same as Sextus' – also prevailed earlier in the Pyrrhonist tradition, all the way back to Pyrrho himself; but the details are much less clear, since we have only fragments and second- or third-hand reports to go on\(^5\). Moreover, there is clear (though again indirect) evidence of an argumentative activity designed to lead to suspension of judgement in the Academy during the Hellenistic period, and this is what has led to this phase of the school being called the sceptical Academy, even

---

\(^5\) For Pyrrho, see Bett 2014, Svavarsson 2010; for Aenesidemus, who later originated the way of thinking, claiming allegiance to Pyrrho, to which Sextus eventually belonged, see Schofield 2007, Hankinson 2010.
though the term “scepticism” is not one these Academics used of themselves. In all these cases, the suspension of judgement is meant to be quite unrestricted as to subject-matter – one suspends judgement about *everything* – although there are a number of questions concerning what exactly this amounts to.

The alleged universality of the sceptics’ suspension of judgement is, indeed, the basis for the *apraxia* charge leveled against them by their opponents: if one suspends judgement about *everything*, how can one decide what to do – in fact, how can one act at all? Surely any kind of human action is explicable only in light of the agent’s taking certain things to be the case and other things not to be the case. This charge clearly presupposes that the sceptic’s suspension of judgement extends to topics that would be relevant to one’s everyday behavior – not only to, as we might say, “purely theoretical” topics. In the case of Sextus Empiricus, at least, it is not hard to see how this might be so. Although his discussions are largely focused on controversies among philosophers and other theorists, they often put into question things that, at least on the face of it, all of us who live and act in the world must take for granted: for example, that there are such things as motion, bodies, places and times, that certain things are true and that, some of the time at least, we can tell which these are, and that certain things are good and others bad. If one suspends judgement about all these things and more, how can one function at all?

Both the Academic sceptics and the Pyrrhonists felt the need to respond to challenges of this kind. The two major Academic sceptics, Arcesilaus and Carneades,

---

7 I choose examples from each of the three major divisions of philosophy recognized in the Hellenistic period and later, according to which Sextus organizes a great deal of his material (although not in Sextus’ order): physics, logic and ethics.
are reported to have argued that action, and even successful action yielding happiness, is possible for one who suspends judgement (Sextus, *M* 7.150-89, Cicero, *Academica* 2.99-104). While the details are complicated and controversial⁸, in both cases the responses seem to have involved the idea that some of our impressions of things may present themselves as more attractive or persuasive than others, and that this can allow the kinds of discriminations needed to make choices and to act, without our having to commit ourselves to their truth⁹. Whatever the success of these moves, the goal is clearly to show that life is possible for someone who comprehensively suspends judgement. As for Sextus, he tells us that the sceptic is able to act by following the appearances (*PH* 1.21-4)¹⁰. We may be unable to tell how things are in their ultimate nature; what exactly motion, body, place and time, or truth, or good and bad, really are may forever elude us, and hence we may not even be able to demonstrate their existence in a rationally compelling way. But there certainly appear to be bodies in motion, and other bodies at rest, in certain times and places, and some things certainly strike us as good in certain circumstances, and others as bad. These everyday impressions are sufficient for us to settle on some actions and avoid others, and they do not depend on our having reached a resolution on any questions about the real nature of things. Whether these everyday impressions should be accorded the status of *beliefs*, and if so, what

---

⁹ The coherence of this idea has recently been challenged by Perin 2013, section 1. Perin’s argument is a strong one; however, the fact remains that this seems to have been how Arcesilaus and Carneades argued.
¹⁰ For an indication that this issue also exercised early Pyrrhonists, see Diogenes Laertius 9.62, and for discussion see Bett 2000, chapter 2.4.
is their content, are questions of some controversy in recent scholarship\textsuperscript{11}. For our purposes, the important point is that Sextus takes the ways things appear to us in everyday experience (that is, both our sensory experience and everyday ideas in our heads) to allow us an entirely adequate basis for action and choice, without involving us in any way in commitments concerning how things really are; that is the area in which the sceptic is said to practise universal suspension of judgement.

The sceptics, then, suspend judgement, and they argue that this is quite compatible with the living of a human life. But this does not yet amount to a clearly defined way of life. What is the point of engaging in this practice? Here the two sceptical traditions diverge. It is not clear that the Academics had anything helpful to say on this question. There are indications that Arcesilaus may have seen suspension of judgement as a matter of intellectual integrity\textsuperscript{12}; for Carneades the picture is even less clear\textsuperscript{13}. But at any rate, the idea of a distinctive sceptical way of life does not seem to have figured in Academic thinking. On the other hand the Pyrrhonists, from first to last, located in suspension of judgement an important practical payoff; and here, if anywhere, the notion of a sceptical way of life is to be found. From now on I shall concentrate solely on the writings of Sextus Empiricus, where the chances of getting clear on this are by far the best\textsuperscript{14}.

\textsuperscript{11} Classic presentations of these issues are the essays in Burnyeat and Frede 1997; see also Brennan 1994, Perin 2010a, Vogt 2012a.
\textsuperscript{12} For a forceful presentation of this case, see Cooper 2004.
\textsuperscript{13} Obdrzalek 2006, 243 calls it “completely unclear”.
\textsuperscript{14} John Sellars pointed out that a Buddhist model might furnish another possible way in which scepticism could be of practical help today. I would not dispute this, and in fact some of my remarks in the later part of the paper about the contemporary viability of sceptical ways of thinking might either apply to, or else be usefully addressed by, a Buddhist-style scepticism. However, the relation of Buddhism to scepticism, and particularly to ancient Greek scepticism, is a very delicate question; for reasons both of simplicity and of my own uncertainty about that issue, and also in deference to
The payoff, according to Sextus (following his Pyrrhonist predecessors\(^{15}\)), is ataraxia, tranquility or freedom from worry. Suspension of judgement releases one from a great deal of turmoil that afflicts those who hold definite opinions or who are endeavoring to do so. Sextus tells two, seemingly rather different, stories about why this is so. According to the first, the sceptic starts out as someone seeking ataraxia by means of discovering the truth \((PH 1.12, 26)\), troubled by the great variety of views about things and hoping to sift through them and determine which are true and which false. The trouble, then, seems to reside in one’s uncertainty, and settling how things are will, it is hoped, release one from this. However, this is not what actually happens. Instead, the conflicts in opinions and impressions, on whatever subject one investigates, continue to impress one, and the resolution of these conflicts never occurs; rather, the opposing positions strike one as equally powerful, and so, finding no more inclination to adopt any one of these positions over any other, one is led to suspend judgement. But now, the result of suspending judgement is precisely the ataraxia one was seeking in the first place. Sextus does not explain why this is so. But it looks as if, instead of agonizing over where the truth lies, one comes to the attitude that this really doesn’t matter and that the project of discovering the truth is very possibly a fool’s errand; it has not led to any successful results so far, and it involves those engaged in it in nothing but trouble.

---

\(^{15}\) For early Pyrrhonism’s adherence to the same goal, see Aristeocles in Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 14.18.4, Sextus, *M* 11.141, with Bett 2000, chapter 2.2-3. The term ataraxia is not attested in connection with Aenesidemus. But the contrast he is said to have drawn between the torments afflicting those who pursue the vain search for knowledge, and the happiness of the Pyrrhonist (Photius, *Bibliotheca* 169b21-30), suggests that he considers freedom from trouble a central component of this happiness.
trouble from which, by suspending judgement, one can float free. And then, having once come to experience the connection between suspension of judgement and tranquility, one embarks on a new project in which suspension of judgement, with the accompanying tranquility, is itself the goal. At this point one is a full-fledged sceptic, and it is the producing and maintaining of suspension of judgement in which, according to an oft-quoted sentence of *PH* (1.8), the sceptic’s “ability” (*dunamis*) consists.

As I said, Sextus does not elaborate on this account; while the outlines are fairly clear, much of what I have said in the last paragraph is inference rather than a simple reading of what Sextus actually says. However, in several places he does address directly the question of why suspension of judgement leads to tranquility (*PH* 1.27-30, 3.235-8, *M* 11.110-67), and here a rather different picture emerges. Instead of suspension of judgement generally, it is suspension of judgement specifically about good and bad that results in *ataraxia*. People who believe that some things are really, or by nature, good and others bad – and according to Sextus this includes both non-sceptical philosophers and ordinary people (*PH* 1.30) – are greatly troubled; they care desperately about getting or keeping the good things and freeing themselves from or avoiding the bad things. By contrast, the sceptic, who by definition lacks any of these beliefs to the effect that some things are by nature good and others by nature bad, is freed from all these troubles; the stakes for the sceptic are simply much lower than for everyone else. Sextus does acknowledge that the sceptic experiences pain, hunger and other disagreeable feelings that occur whether or not one has certain opinions; as he tells us, the sceptic’s goal (*telos*) is *ataraxia* in
matters of opinion and “moderate feeling” (*metriopatheia*) in matters over which we have no control (*PH* 1.25). But even here the sceptic is better off than other people, and his “moderate” level of feeling is in part the result of his suspension of judgement. For while everyone experiences pain, hunger, etc., the non-sceptic additionally holds the opinion that this is in reality a bad thing – precisely the kind of opinion that causes violent turmoil and that the sceptic is free of (*PH* 1.30). Indeed, Sextus even suggests that this opinion may be a source of greater distress than the pain or hunger itself (*PH* 3.236, *M* 11.159-61).

It is not obvious how we are supposed to combine these two accounts – the one about an initial quest for *ataraxia* via the discovery of truth, which instead leads to suspension of judgement and achieves its original end in this unexpected way, and the one about the turmoil caused by believing that some things are by nature good and others bad, and the sceptic’s freedom from all such beliefs. Sextus clearly sees no tension between them, since in one place he freely switches back and forth between the two (*PH* 1.25-30). And indeed, there is no reason why both might not be true at the same time, with beliefs about good and bad being an especially serious source of distress, but *ataraxia* also being derived from suspension of judgement about things more generally. Another possibility is that beliefs about good and bad may be intertwined with broader beliefs about the nature of things, so that the two accounts are not as distinct as I have made them sound. But Sextus never pursues these lines of thought, and so we are left in some uncertainty as to how the two stories are supposed to relate to one another.
How, then, should we imagine the life of a sceptic of the sort that Sextus claims to be? First of all, it is a life filled with philosophical activity of a particular kind. Sextus is ambivalent about whether to call scepticism a philosophy – deliberately so, I believe; he wants to shake up the reader’s intuitions about what philosophy actually is\textsuperscript{16}. The sceptic is not, of course, a philosopher in the sense of someone who puts forward definite theories. What he does is to engage in philosophical argument on multiple sides of a question. As I said, Sextus says that the sceptic is marked by having the “ability” to assemble opposing arguments and impressions on any given topic in such a way that they have, for the reader or listener, the characteristic of “equal strength” (isostheneia); one is no more inclined towards any one of these opposing positions over any others, and this results in suspension of judgement, which in turn yields tranquility (PH 1.8). With the partial exception of PH 1, which is a general account of what scepticism is, Sextus’ surviving writings consists almost entirely of this kind of procedure; but it is a fair assumption that the same kind of procedure was deployed by the Pyrrhonists in oral form as well.

This argumentative activity may be used to try to convert others to scepticism. But it is important to note that it is also used by the sceptics themselves to maintain their own scepticism. For this kind of scepticism – unlike the usual kinds of scepticism encountered in contemporary philosophy – is not a conclusion reached once and for all, or indeed any kind of result attained once and for all; instead, it is an ongoing activity, in which suspension of judgement continues to be

\textsuperscript{16} I have discussed this in Bett 2013. The ambivalence is also noted by Tor 2014, n.32.
produced or renewed. The sceptic’s suspension of judgement cannot be assumed to be stable over the long term. One is liable to lapse into the holding of definite beliefs, with the deleterious consequences that Sextus takes to follow from that; hence the need for a routine in which one regularly rehearses the considerations for and against competing views on the same subjects, generates a situation of “equal strength” among them, and suspends judgement as a result. The various sets of Pyrrhonist Modes, or standardized forms of argument, that Sextus lays out in *PH 1* (31-186), seem especially designed for this purpose; but most of Sextus’ voluminous surviving corpus can also be understood as, at least in part, directed to this goal.

Here, then, is one central aspect of the sceptic’s life: the persistent arranging of arguments and impressions in opposition to one another so as to produce “equal strength” and therefore suspension of judgement, and therefore continued *ataraxia*. It is this that is the most plausible candidate for being the *skepsis*, the “inquiry”, that is alluded to in the title “sceptic” (*skeptikos* or “inquirer”) itself. In the opening sentences of *PH* Sextus makes it sound as if the sceptic is someone who is still searching for the truth – by contrast with those who think they have discovered it or who have decided that it cannot be found (*PH 1.1-3*). But his actual description of what scepticism is, in *PH 1.8* and elsewhere¹⁷, suggests much more the posture of someone who has already decided that the most effective route to *ataraxia* is suspension of judgement, and who therefore concentrates on producing suspension of judgement. This process, as we have seen, involves the consideration of arguments pro and contra, and so it is not absurd to call it “inquiry”; it is also open-

¹⁷ See especially *PH 1.18.*
minded as to the ultimate possibility or impossibility of the truth being discovered (since to have come to a decision on this question would already be a violation of suspension of judgement). But if “inquiry” is taken, as it naturally might be, to suggest an active and serious search for the truth, then it is misleading as applied to a sceptic of Sextus’ variety; the sceptic is someone who is looking to maintain ataraxia, and who has found a way of doing it in which inquiry, in that sense, has no place\textsuperscript{18}. To be sure, Sextus does describe the sceptic as someone who starts out an inquirer – who aims to discover the truth and to attain ataraxia that way; but the shift from this attitude to scepticism itself is precisely the abandonment of inquiry in that sense. Still, the sceptic’s characteristic activity does resemble inquiry (in that sense) in that it consists in a great deal of philosophical or theoretical reflection.

But the sceptic is of course not only a philosopher (if that is the right word); he is also a human being who engages in everyday human activities. As we saw, the apraxia charge, the charge that a sceptic cannot act, is answered by Sextus with the claim that the sceptic follows appearances, and that this is sufficient for choice and action but does not violate suspension of judgement. In the chapter in which he discusses this, he lists four major categories of “appearances” that are especially important in guiding the sceptic’s behavior. Examining these will tell us a little more about what a sceptical life might actually look like.

The four categories of appearances, in Sextus’ own words, are as follows:

“one consists in the guidance of nature, one in the necessity of how we are affected,

\footnote{18 For interpretations more sympathetic to the notion of the sceptic as a genuine inquirer, see Perin 2010b, Vogt 2012b, ch.5. Other interpretations that either dismiss Sextus’ claim to be an “inquirer”, or who understand “inquiry” as something other than a search for truth, include Palmer 2000, Striker 2001, Grgic 2006 and Marchand 2010.}
one in the handing down of laws and customs, and one in the teaching of forms of
expertise” (*PH* 1.23). He goes on to say that by the first “we are naturally liable to
perceive and think”, by the second “hunger drives us to food, thirst to drink”, by the
third “we accept being pious as good and being impious as bad, in terms of ordinary
life”, and by the fourth “we are not inactive in the forms of expertise we adopt” (*PH*
1.24). The first two of these can fairly be called natural and the other two cultural.
The point of the first, I take it, is that we are born with certain perceptual and
cognitive abilities, and these in obvious ways shape how we interact with and think
about the world. We see things in terms of the ways our eyes equip us to see them,
and we engage in certain characteristic kinds of thought-process – for example, not
being willing to accept obvious contradictions. We do not need to endorse these
ways of perceiving and thinking as warranted or legitimate, or as giving us the truth
about things; we simply *have* these tendencies to perceive and think in certain
particular ways, and these add up to one major type of “appearances” that affect
what we do. The second category consists of natural urges that prompt us to action:
one feels hungry, and that by itself leads one to eat, without any opinions on our
part being required.

The consistency of the third and fourth categories with suspension of
judgement is a little less obvious. Does the third not involve a commitment to the
*opinion* that piety is good and impiety bad? And does not the teaching of any
expertise involve signing on to numerous intellectual commitments? Concerning
piety, Sextus’ answer must surely center around the qualification “in terms of
ordinary life” (*biòtikôs*); this must be intended to mark a way of accepting the
goodness of piety and the badness of impiety that does not commit one to believing that piety is in reality good and impiety bad. The explanation that I find most satisfactory is that the sceptic engages in the ordinary religious practices of his society, but *merely* as a matter of practice, without invoking any doctrines. These would include rituals of various kinds; they might also include certain speech acts such as prayers. But the idea would be that the sceptic does these things because he has been trained to do them, through having lived in a society in which these things are routine, rather than because he accepts the truth of certain propositions about what the gods are like and how we should relate to them. It is not in fact clear that Sextus has an entirely consistent account when it comes to religion; elsewhere he seems to attribute to ordinary people just the sort of religious beliefs that he here seems anxious to distance himself from (which puts ordinary people in the same boat as philosophers on this issue – *PH* 1.161-2, 3.218-19, *M* 9.50, 191-2), and yet he is also eager to claim that he is religious in the same way as ordinary people (as opposed to philosophers) are religious (*PH* 3.2, *M* 9.49). But the idea of acting according to the laws and customs of one’s society, simply because one has had these habits inculcated in one through living in that society and not because of endorsing the norms that those habits might seem to reflect, nonetheless appears to be Sextus’ model for how the sceptic acts in what we may broadly call the ethical and religious domains.

---

19 I have discussed this further in Bett 2009 and Bett forthcoming a.
20 For further specifics, again see the works cited in the previous note.
21 Another text bearing on this is *M* 11.166.
Something similar must also be the case with the teaching of expertise. Many kinds of expertise can in fact be understood, in the main at any rate, as forms of “knowing how” as opposed to “knowing that” (to use a jargon from contemporary Anglophone philosophy). Dancing, swimming, riding a bicycle or driving a car would be obvious examples; to be successful in these pursuits, one needs to learn to do certain things, not to grasp the truth of certain propositions. One may wonder how far this model can be extended; in particular, medicine, an expertise that Sextus himself pursued (PH 2.238, M 1.260, 11.47), might seem not to fit it – surely a successful doctor must know some medical truths, not just medical techniques. But Sextus would deny this, and he was not alone; the Empiric school of medicine, to which he belonged, was notable precisely for restricting itself to methods of cure that had proven themselves over time, without speculation about what it was in the inner workings of the body that made them work. In any case, varieties of expertise that require no absorption of doctrine, but can be mastered entirely as know-how, are the ones that Sextus can clearly avail himself of consistently with his scepticism.

It looks, then, as if the sceptic has available to him a pretty broad repertoire of actions. In fact, from the outside a sceptic might be hard to distinguish from an ordinary member of society. Since the sceptic was, we may assume, both born with the same native human capacities as other people and raised in the same manner as any normal member of his society, and since these native capacities and manners of upbringing are what largely shape how he acts, according to the passage that we have just been examining, it looks as if a sceptic would be hard to pick out of a crowd – so long as scepticism itself did not come up as a topic. But if the sceptic
goes about doing very much the same kinds of things most people do, it does not follow that he is not in certain ways – on the inside, as we might say – highly unusual.

A helpful way into this issue may be to note the character of the sceptic’s conformism. The sceptic, as I just said, does what he was born and raised to do. But he does so not because he has decided that these are the right ways to behave, as many conservative members of society, and also some philosophers (of Edmund Burke’s temperament, perhaps), might decide; he does so just because these natural and cultural influences are the ones that have shaped his dispositions (and this “because” is causal, not justificatory). In fact, “conformism” is perhaps not the right word for this kind of stance, since “conformism” might suggest some kind of endorsement of the patterns of behavior engaged in; perhaps the sceptic’s situation could better be described as one of conformity without conformism. Now, this may of course also be true of another, more unthinking segment of society; no doubt many people have been raised in certain habits, have never given much thought to them, and simply act according to them without reflecting on their legitimacy. Yet the sceptic is very different from this group as well. The sceptic has reached the position of letting these natural and societal habits determine his behavior not through a lack of thinking, but by means of a highly self-conscious process of reflecting on all kinds of candidate theories about the way things really are, including theories – some of them very non-conformist – about the way human beings ought to behave, and suspending judgement about all of them. As I mentioned, this process of generating suspension of judgement is ongoing and it is
deliberate; as we can now see, one of its effects is to guarantee that nothing else will serve as a determinant of the sceptic’s actions than the bundle of natural and societal dispositions with which he has been endowed.

And this in turn, as has often been remarked, leads to an extraordinary passivity in the sceptic’s way of acting. Given the dispositions that I just mentioned, the sceptic is inclined for or against particular actions on specific occasions. He is aware of these inclinations, and observes their effect on his behavior. But he does not get involved with them in any way; he simply lets them do their work, watching them unfold just as if it was not *him* to which they were happening at all. In fact, there is a sense in which the sceptic is not fully an agent, or in different terminology, not fully a self. If we think of an agent or a self as having, or being, a cluster of concerns, priorities and perspectives on the world in which he, she or it is invested, and which shape one’s choices and actions through that very engagement, then the sceptic does not qualify. True, the sceptic has concerns, priorities and perspectives of a kind – these are given by the dispositions ingrained in him – but his attitude towards them is spectacularly disengaged. Indeed, that is the whole point. The project of suspending judgement, so that one does not come down on the side of anything’s really being any particular way, in terms of its nature or its value, ensures that one will not treat one’s own concerns and priorities as tracking anything that really matters; they may push one in various directions, and there is nothing wrong with that, but they do not constitute genuine commitments,

---

22 This was first really brought to the fore by Burnyeat 1997b; I have discussed aspects of it in Bett 2008 and Bett 2011.
and hence they are not fundamental to who one is. Nor, as far as I can see, is anything else.

To repeat, what one gets for one’s suspension of judgement is ataraxia. This was the goal from the start, and this is what suspension of judgement has been found to produce. And in fact one can see how ataraxia might be thought to go along with the disengaged mindset that I have just outlined; if you do not really care about anything, you have nothing to worry about. In any case, this is what the life of the sceptic, as Sextus portrays him, would be like: a vigorous debater, with the goal not of winning any debates but of bringing them all to a stalemate; and in the rest of life, as a result of this very stalemate, an outward conformer, calmly going about his business, but lacking any inner commitment to or involvement with the activities he performs.

So, how much of this could we accept today? One obvious point is that many of us care about a good many other things besides tranquility. Some might say that if tranquility is to be achieved only with the radical disengagement that we have just seen, that is too high a price to pay; maintaining a robust sense of agency or selfhood is at least as important23. But even aside from that, it may well seem that making tranquility the only goal is distorted and unrealistic; there are other things worth

---

23 Christof Rapp emphasized that there is a range of notions of agency, and that many of my concerns in the next few paragraphs about the palatability of scepticism to a contemporary audience depend upon a relatively robust conception of what it is to be an agent. This is a fair point. However, I would emphasize in return that the disengaged, stripped down kind of agency that is implicit in Sextus’ picture is at the extreme opposite end of the spectrum; I suspect that very few people would be comfortable with the degree of passivity his account seems to involve. Still, this is not really essential to what I am trying to argue. My main focus in these paragraphs is on the fact that the link between suspension of judgement and tranquility, at least for us today, is considerably less secure than Sextus seems to suppose. For this purpose it suffices that the sorts of disturbed attitudes I describe are one likely reaction to suspension of judgement; I do not deny that for some people and in some circumstances, Sextus’ route from suspension of judgement to tranquility, or something close to it, might indeed work.
caring about at least as much, even if they are likely to come at the expense of some tranquility. Of course, if caring about these other things depends on believing in some set of objects or purposes that are genuinely good, the procedure of inducing suspension of judgement might eventually lead someone to stop caring about them. But for someone who has not yet embarked on the sceptical procedure, and who currently does care seriously about additional things besides tranquility, that is no reason to get started towards scepticism.

Suppose, however, that we accept ataraxia as the goal. Can something like Sextus’ method appeal to us today as a plausible means of achieving it? Here too I think there are a number of problems. First, to touch again on the sceptic’s disengagement or lack of investment in anything, it seems quite possible that for many people today this would actually be an impediment to tranquility rather than an accompaniment to it. In modern times, the thought that nothing really matters is often associated with the perception that, perhaps because of the fading of traditional religious certainties, there are no longer any secure values to cling to, or that science has shown that we live in a value‐free universe. And these ideas, for those who are gripped by them, seem to be much more often experienced as disturbing than as comforting. Such existential angst is usually seen as a distinctively modern phenomenon, although I am not sure why such thoughts could not have occurred to someone in the ancient world in times of great transition or unrest. In any case, given these trends in modern culture and thought, the sort of disengaged mindset that Sextus’ scepticism produces is at least as likely to create new worries as to be linked with tranquility. It is a mindset that has generally been
seen as one that we need to get beyond by means of inventive counter-measures, such as Nietzsche’s call for creating new values\textsuperscript{24} or the existentialist project in which one makes a radical choice and thereby makes of oneself a certain type of person\textsuperscript{25}. These are ways of becoming engaged agents despite the lack of any values built into the world, which is virtually the opposite of the path taken by Sextus’ sceptic.

Something similar is true when we consider one of Sextus’ explanations for why the result of suspension of judgement is ataraxia. This was the idea that someone who lacks any definite beliefs to the effect that some things are really, or by nature, good and others bad will be released from the immense anxiety and turmoil experienced by those who do have such beliefs. Now, there may be some people for whom this is true: for example, people who previously cared a great deal about the terrible things going on in the world, but who, upon ceasing to have the definite view that anything is really bad (or, for that matter, good), find themselves less troubled by these things. There may also be some objects about which people generally care too much, so that coming to doubt whether they have any real value would make these people calmer and less overwrought. On the other hand, it is equally likely that for many people, ceasing to believe that anything has any real value would result not in tranquility, but in despair born of a sense of meaninglessness\textsuperscript{26} – something that could be escaped only by either renewing one’s

\textsuperscript{24} See, e.g., Beyond Good and Evil 211.
\textsuperscript{25} For a succinct statement of this project, see Sartre 1973.
\textsuperscript{26} Bruno Haas objected that such a person has not, in fact, shed the commitment to the reality of value; there remains a feeling that something important is lacking, and this can only be explained by a residual sense that some things (in this case, the very presence or absence of an objective order of values) really are good or bad. By contrast, someone who had completed the readjustment of
sense of real value in the world, say by a religious conversion, or by the sort of Nietzschean or existentialist moves that I mentioned just now (and that could not have occurred to Sextus\textsuperscript{27}), whereby one retrieves a sense of having a meaningful place in the world and comes to care about the course of events even while holding on to the insight (as such thinkers would regard it) that nothing is of value in itself. Thinking that things really matter can be a burden, and Sextus plays this idea for all it is worth; but equally, not thinking that anything matters can be a burden, and Sextus’ outlook wholly fails to take this into account.

What of Sextus’ other explanation for suspension of judgement’s resulting in ataraxia? To recall, this was the idea that one is released from the worries associated with wondering where the truth lies but not being able to pin it down. Now, it is certainly possible that someone might come to see the considerations for or against various competing positions on some topic as being equally powerful, and in light of that very point stop caring about the matter one way or the other. But it is far from clear that this would be the inevitable result. If someone is troubled by not

\textsuperscript{27} Because, for him (as for the ancients in general, I think), genuinely caring about something and thinking that it is by nature good or bad seem to belong inextricably together.
having been able to determine where the truth lies, why should finding the competing considerations equally powerful not make this trouble worse rather than better? This development would seem to make the chances of success even more remote, and it is by no means obvious why the uniform reaction to this would be to give up on the search and stop minding that it had led to this inconclusive result. This is especially true in cases where discovering the truth might make a big difference to our lives. Suppose one is hot on the trail of a cure for cancer, or a method for reversing climate change. Would finding that the evidence equally supports and conflicts with a potentially helpful theory on one of these subjects be a recipe for serenity and quietude, or for great disappointment (which one might get beyond only by throwing oneself with renewed vigor into the search)? The latter would seem much more probable.

Thus the tranquility that is central to the Pyrrhonist conception of scepticism as a way of life seems problematic in a number of ways. It is not clear why we should wish to pursue it to the exclusion of everything else, and neither of the two accounts Sextus gives of why it regularly follows upon suspension of judgement seem plausible. One can think of cases in which tranquility would be the result, but there are also cases where the reverse would be true; it depends on the circumstances, the character of the persons involved, and the nature of the topic on which suspension of judgement is exercised. This may be a boring conclusion, but Sextus just does not seem able to make as much of ataraxia as he would like. There may be special features of the modern world that make it particularly hard for him to make his case to us. I mentioned the widespread modern perception of, and
nervousness about, a breakdown in stable values, as well as our ability to affect the world in ways that Sextus could not have dreamed of; it may also be that the appeal of tranquility as a central goal was simply greater in Sextus’ day than in ours – I am not sure. In any case, I do not think that differences between our world and Sextus’ are the full explanation for the difficulties surrounding tranquility; the claim that it reliably results from suspension of judgement should have seemed dubious in his own day as well as in ours.

Now, if one ceases to take tranquility as seriously as Sextus does, the idea of scepticism as a way of life loses its focus. If not for tranquility as the goal and as the reliable result of suspension of judgement, it is not clear what the point would be of suspending judgement on all possible occasions. But a further point – and this is a significant difference between Sextus’ world and our own – is that suspension of judgement is just not available to us on anything like the same range of subjects as it was in the ancient world. Even in his day, Sextus’ claim to be able to produce suspension of judgement on all questions examined by philosophers and other theorists seems strikingly bold; might there not be issues where the arguments were overwhelming on one side rather than the other, and where presenting the opposing cases in such a way as to make them equally persuasive was therefore impossible? One might reply that the sceptic’s “ability” at assembling oppositions includes the ability to manipulate the evidence and the arguments so as to bring the

---

28 Ataraxia is of course the Epicureans’ ideal as well as the Pyrrhonists’, and the Stoic sage also achieves something recognizably similar. But it was not universal in this role among philosophies in the Hellenistic period and later antiquity, and besides, it is not clear that Greco-Roman culture in general placed as much value on it as these philosophies did.

29 I have discussed this further in Bett forthcoming b.
opposing sides into “equal strength”. But aside from the concerns that this may raise about underhandedness, it is not clear how it would be supposed to work when the person at whom this procedure is directed is the sceptic himself – which, as we saw, is an important aspect of the sceptic’s activity; how does one manipulate oneself into finding two sides equally persuasive when the balance of the arguments clearly favors one side?

Be that as it may, for us there is clearly no chance of suspension of judgement on all theoretical subjects. There is a vast range of subjects, particularly in the natural sciences but not only there, where we simply know too much for suspension of judgement to be an option; a great many questions have been settled in a way that neither Sextus nor any of his contemporaries could have imagined. And they have been settled not just at a theoretical level; the answers to these questions have been incorporated into our lives in the myriad forms of technology that surround us all the time. Although we of course still have a great many unanswered questions even in the sciences, the basic science that underlies, say, television or antibiotics is not going to be put into question. In the ancient world, it is fair to say, much less about the nature of the world was settled, and much more could be debated only at the level of abstract argument, where it was not unreasonable to think that opposing positions might be equally balanced. And so the notion of a universal suspension of judgement, while perhaps an exaggerated hope even in Sextus’ time, was far more realistic for him than it could ever be for us. Where suspension of judgement remains a serious option for us is especially in subjects such as ethics or religion – or, we might add, philosophy – where fundamental assumptions are open to
question and there are few, if any, agreed-upon methods of proceeding. A latter-day sceptic might be advised to concentrate mainly on areas such as these.

So what is left of the idea of living as a sceptic? If we discount the idea of scepticism as a sure route to tranquility, and if we give up on the idea that suspension of judgement is available on all subjects, we are left, it seems to me, with a directive to look at all sides of a question whenever possible, to be suspicious of dogmatic claims delivered with bluster rather than evidence, and to suspend judgement whenever the case on each side of the question seems to be equally strong. The standards used to judge when this is so could themselves be open to question in the same way, but as Sextus says, in the end we have no alternative but to rely on the ways of perceiving and thinking that we are born with and/or trained in. It is likely that this kind of sceptical scrutiny would generally be exercised in the more contentious subjects such as I mentioned just now – in their manifestations in public debates, just as much as in more arcane academic contexts; but there is no reason why it could not equally be trained on unresolved questions in, say, physics or biology or linguistics, supposing one was capable of understanding the issues. It is possible that following this program would bring a measure of inner calm; I did not mean to imply that the prospect of tranquility is to be absolutely dismissed. But as I suggested, this is no more than a possibility – it depends upon individual issues and personalities; some might be more tranquil clinging to certainties, regardless of the evidence. Yet even if suspension of judgement about, say, central questions of value induces vertigo rather than tranquility – which, as I said, it is often thought to
do in the modern world – there may be a compensating sense of satisfaction at one’s own intellectual honesty.

Beyond any benefits to the individual, however, a scepticism of this scaled-down contemporary variety – which, it may be noted, is something much closer to the non-philosophical notion of a sceptical temperament that I mentioned at the beginning than to the positions generally labeled scepticism in contemporary philosophy – may have the potential to benefit society more generally. In a society such as the United States, much of which is increasingly fragmenting into two parallel societies (roughly speaking, conservative and liberal) having different and deeply entrenched values, different media outlets, and different lifestyles in different locations, and where politics and even civil discourse is becoming increasingly dysfunctional as a result, it might be a very good thing if there were more sceptics around; equally, in societies that are less fragmented, a certain amount of scepticism in the population might be a valuable safeguard against this or other dangerous social developments. At the end of PH (3.280) Sextus says that sceptics are philanthropic and wish to cure the dogmatists’ rashness. While there is nothing in either Sextus’ own scepticism or in the contemporary counterpart I have been sketching that would ensure such a benevolent disposition, I think we have good reason to hope, or wish, for a measure of such “philanthropic” scepticism in ourselves and in those around us.30

30 I would like to thank Gerhard Ernst for inviting me to the very stimulating Erlangen conference where this paper was first presented, and to the other participants at the conference for their helpful reactions – especially, but by no means only, those named in earlier footnotes (nn.14, 23, 26). I also thank an audience at UC Santa Barbara for a very stimulating discussion of the issues in this paper, and in particular Sonny Elizondo for prompting an important correction in my formulation of one of these.
Bibliography


