

## Skepticism

Modern scholarship recognizes two philosophical traditions in the ancient Greco-Roman world as skeptical: the Academy, in a certain period of its history, and Pyrrhonism.

While only the Pyrrhonists used the term *skeptikos*, “inquirer”, to refer to themselves, it was already perceived in antiquity – particularly, as we shall see, in the period covered by this volume – that Pyrrhonism and the phase of the Academy that we now call skeptical had much in common with one another. Central to both traditions is a practice of inducing suspension of judgement through a presentation of opposing arguments on the same subject.

The skeptical Academy began with Arcesilaus (316/5-241/0 BCE), the fifth head of the Academy after Plato, and extended to Philo of Larissa in the early first century BCE. But Philo’s skepticism was of a highly mitigated kind, allowing the holding of opinions, even if only tentative and admittedly fallible ones – in contrast to the rigorous suspension of judgement promoted earlier<sup>1</sup>; and Philo’s pupil, and subsequently Academic rival, Antiochus of Ascalon seems to have abandoned skepticism entirely, taking this to be truer to Plato’s original legacy<sup>2</sup>. These two effectively mark the end of the Academy as an institution. But the enfeebling and eventual rejection of skepticism that they represent led to a reaction by Aenesidemus of Cnossos, who appears to have belonged for a time to the Academy himself. Setting himself against the Academy, and especially the Academy of his own day, Aenesidemus founded a new rigorously skeptical

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<sup>1</sup> The details of Philo’s philosophical development are complex and controversial; but this much would be generally agreed. See Brittain 2001, Lévy 2010.

<sup>2</sup> The thought of Antiochus, too, is difficult to interpret beyond this very general level; for a variety of perspectives, see Sedley 2012.

movement claiming inspiration from Pyrrho of Elis (c.360-270 BCE)<sup>3</sup>. Pyrrho's own views are hard to reconstruct, and he does not seem to have founded any lasting tradition of thought; but Aenesidemus clearly read him as eschewing all doctrines, and hence as a suitable figurehead for his own new outlook. This new Pyrrhonist movement lasted at least until the second century CE; although we have no indication that it was ever a formal school, we know the names of several of its adherents, and we also have extensive surviving writings from one of these, Sextus Empiricus.

Thus, in the period covered by this volume, we have one living skeptical tradition, the Pyrrhonists; the skeptical tradition from the Academy, and indeed the Academy itself, has been dead, at least as a formal institution, for some time. It is therefore somewhat surprising to find that several people in the second century CE seem to have treated the thought of the Academy, and especially the skeptical Academy, as a live option. Epictetus twice engages in polemic against Academics who claim to subvert our knowledge of even the most basic facts about the world around us (*Discourses* 1.5, 2.20-1-5); and Galen devotes a whole work (*De Optima Doctrina, On the Best Method of Teaching*) to polemic against skeptical Academic ideas. In Galen's case the target is explicit; Favorinus is the holder of the Academic position being criticized. And that Epictetus also had Favorinus in mind seems clear from the fact that, as Galen tells us (*Opt. Doctr.* 1, p.92, 12-14 Barigazzi), Favorinus wrote a work *Against Epictetus*, featuring a dialogue between Epictetus and a slave of Plutarch. In the same passage Galen also tells us that Favorinus wrote another work called *Plutarch, or the Academic*

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<sup>3</sup> See Hankinson 2010, Schofield 2007 and, in opposition to these on a number of points, Bett 2000, ch.4. Again, there is general agreement on this basic description, but considerable disagreement on the specifics.

*Disposition.* The prominence of Plutarch in this context is no accident; besides being Favorinus' teacher, Plutarch shows clear interest in the skeptical Academy (despite also being strongly attracted to some of the more doctrinal sides of Plato), and sometimes makes use of arguments of Academic character in his own polemics against the Stoics and the Epicureans.

Both Favorinus and Plutarch are featured elsewhere in this volume; and in recent years there have been other good, concise treatments of Favorinus' credentials as an Academic skeptic (see Bibliographical Note). I will therefore confine myself to a few remarks about the extent of the connection between Favorinus' embrace of the Academic label and his broader rhetorical activity. The rest of the essay will then concentrate on the Pyrrhonist side of things – though, as we shall see, Favorinus has some involvement with this side as well.

Simon Swain has plausibly said of Favorinus that “Academic scepticism suited his philosophical pretensions and his rhetorical instincts as someone who might wish to argue on both sides of the question to demonstrate his skills in constructing and demolishing an argument”<sup>4</sup>; and such a combination of philosophy and rhetoric would surely not be unexpected in a leading figure of the Second Sophistic. But a strong aspect of showmanship and performance was characteristic of the skeptical Academy from the start. Neither Arcesilaus nor Carneades (214-129/8 BCE), the other great head of the school in its skeptical phase, wrote anything; both depended entirely on the spoken word, and both were renowned for their use of it. Diogenes Laertius tells us that Arcesilaus “was the first to argue on both sides, and the first to alter the discourse handed down by

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<sup>4</sup> Swain 1997, 178-9.

Plato, making it more contentious [*eristikôteron*] through question and answer” (4.28). And Cicero tells us that Arcesilaus would invite members of his audience to state their opinions, and that he would then argue against them (*Fin. 2.2.*, cf. *De or. 3.80*). The details of these reports do not entirely agree, but I doubt there was any rigid formula; the main point is that Arcesilaus worked by means of extemporaneous speaking in public, and that the result, no matter what materials his audience presented him with, would be a set of opposing arguments on the same subject. As for Carneades, he was famous for have given two speeches on successive days, while on an embassy to Rome in 155 BCE: the first was in favor of justice, the second against it (Lactantius, *Div. inst. 5.14.3-5*, summarizing a now lost portion of Cicero’s *Republic*). Again, there is a philosophical purpose in addition to a rhetorical display; Carneades wants to bring about a situation in which equally powerful opposing arguments produce suspension of judgement – in this case, about the value of justice. But the display is clearly an important element in that enterprise. So if Favorinus did marry his philosophical and rhetorical interests in the way that Swain suggests, this would be quite consonant with the Academic tradition he claims to represent, in addition to belonging well within the sphere of his sophistic activities in general.

If Favorinus’ engagement with Academic skepticism was *nothing but* a rhetorical pose, the verdict would of course be different. But the fact that Galen thought him a philosopher worth refuting, and the fact that he wrote the books referred to in Galen’s essay, suggest otherwise. Yet perhaps a still better indication of Favorinus’ commitment to philosophy is, paradoxically, his interest in the other skeptical tradition, Pyrrhonism. We are told that Favorinus also composed a work in ten books called *Pyrrhonian Modes*

(*Purrôneioi Tropoi*, Aulus Gellius 11.5.5); the Modes are sets of standardized forms of Pyrrhonian argument, which occupy an important role in Sextus Empiricus' account of Pyrrhonism and are discussed or mentioned by several other authors. Gellius' information has been suspected, but on no good grounds<sup>5</sup>. Assuming it is correct, Favorinus must have paid very close attention to the Modes and written about them in great detail; Diogenes Laertius also tells us that Favorinus presented one of the sets of Modes in a different order from his own (9.87), which tends to support this. It is hard to imagine a rhetorical function for this work; rather, we seem to have evidence of sustained philosophical engagement on Favorinus' part, quite independent of his public persona as a sophist.

The depth of interest in Pyrrhonism suggested by this work has also been regarded as problematic seeing that Favorinus identified himself as an Academic; given the history sketched at the beginning, the two traditions were generally seen as distinct and even rival forms of skepticism. But we know that, in this period and in the circles to which Favorinus belonged, there was discussion of the extent of resemblance between the two. Plutarch wrote a work called *On the Difference between Pyrrhonists and Academics* (Lamprias Catalog 64). The title does not, I think, allow us to infer that he saw the difference as significant; for all we know, the work could have been designed to show how small the difference was. But even if Plutarch did think there was an important difference between them, it is by no means clear that Favorinus agreed. Aulus Gellius, in the same chapter as he tells us of Favorinus' work on the Modes, briefly addresses the question. He says that the two traditions have a great deal in common, but that "they

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<sup>5</sup> For details, and defense of both the text and Gellius' credibility, see Holford-Strevens 1997, 213 n.96.

have been thought” (*existimati sunt*, 11.5.8) to differ particularly in that the Academics assert the definite conclusion that nothing can be known, whereas the Pyrrhonists avoid even that conclusion. Since Favorinus features prominently in Gellius’ work as both a character and a source, and Gellius does not otherwise show an extensive knowledge of the history of skepticism, it can hardly be doubted that Favorinus is the source of this material. Whether the supposed difference between the two schools is one that Favorinus accepted, or one that he simply reported, but rejected himself, is impossible to say for sure. Galen, in his critique of Favorinus, speaks of the Academics and Pyrrhonists as if they are interchangeable (*Opt. Doctr.* 2, p.94, 16-17; 3, p.102, 3-4 Barigazzi); but he does not discuss whether Favorinus himself saw a significant difference between the two. And since his main goal is to convict Favorinus of self-contradiction, it is difficult to get from him a clear or consistent picture of what Favorinus’ conception of Academic skepticism was. Certainly Gellius’ report about what the Academics “have been thought” to maintain echoes claims about the Academics that can be found in Cicero (e.g. *Acad.* 1.45, 2.29) and Sextus (e.g., *PH* 1.3, 1.226); and Sextus takes this as a major divide between Academic and Pyrrhonist thinking. So either way, Favorinus would be correctly representing a prominent strand of thought about the difference between the two. Either way, though, he would also be acknowledging important areas of overlap – enough, perhaps, to explain his considerable interest in Pyrrhonism. On balance, however, I am inclined to think that a self-professed Academic who also wrote extensively about Pyrrhonism is more likely to have viewed the two outlooks as amounting to essentially the same – in other words, that he merely reported, but did not endorse, the alleged

difference noted by Gellius. In this case he will have conceived of Pyrrhonism as furnishing new resources for his own Academic position.

Favorinus' philosophizing, then, can be seen as to some extent part and parcel of the rhetorical activity for which he was celebrated in his own day, but to some extent separate from it. This makes him a complex figure; but at least he is recognizably connected with the intellectual and cultural trends with which this volume is mainly concerned. With the Pyrrhonists, and particularly Sextus Empiricus, matters are very different. In what follows I develop this theme in particular; in the course of doing so, I aim also to put on display some central features of the Pyrrhonist philosophy.

For one thing, we get absolutely no sense of the Pyrrhonists as public figures or well-known individuals. Recent studies of the Second Sophistic<sup>6</sup> have emphasized the self-promotion or (to borrow from the title of another essay in this volume) "self-fashioning" characteristic of the sophists of the second century CE; they devoted considerable energy to creating particular identities and projecting these in public. While one would not, of course, necessarily expect the same motivations from philosophers, the contrast with Favorinus – who clearly did cultivate a certain public persona, but also clearly qualifies as a philosopher – is nonetheless striking. While Pyrrhonism in general is known, as we saw, to Plutarch, Galen and Aulus Gellius, we never get any portraits of individual Pyrrhonists. Diogenes Laertius, in his lives of Pyrrho and Pyrrho's disciple Timon, names a number of adherents of the later Pyrrhonist movement besides Aenesidemus and Sextus Empiricus, and occasionally cites some of them for particular points (9.70, 88, 106, 116). Several of these names appear only as part of a "succession"

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<sup>6</sup> E.g., Anderson 1993, Whitmarsh 2005.

of Pyrrhonist philosophers, and as such are dubious; doxographers (that is, summarizers of philosophical doctrines) in later antiquity loved to construct these teacher-pupil lineages of particular schools, often on little or no evidence. But in any case, we are never told anything about any of these characters except their names and, sometimes, their cities of origin, a title of a book they wrote, or who they allegedly taught or were taught by. We do not even get any colorful anecdotes about their habits, of the sort that fill Diogenes' pages (including his pages on Pyrrho and Timon themselves). And no other ancient author makes up for this deficiency. So it is difficult to suppose that any of them made, or were attempting to make, much of an impression on their contemporaries.

And the same is true even of Sextus Empiricus himself. Diogenes mentions him just once, along with a pupil of his, Saturninus (9.116), who to Diogenes' knowledge (and no other author contradicts this) seems to be the last member of the Pyrrhonist movement. Diogenes refers to Sextus' works as "very fine" (*kallista*). Aside from this, Sextus appears to have gone virtually unnoticed in his own time (whenever exactly that was – more on this later). The pseudo-Galenic *Introduction or the Doctor* mentions him as an Empiricist doctor (14.683K), a point confirmed by Diogenes as well as by the title Empiricus; but here too there is no elaboration. And, what is perhaps still more surprising, Sextus' own voluminous surviving works tell us absolutely nothing else about him as a person. He refers to himself occasionally as a medical practitioner; otherwise he does not talk about himself at all, except as an adherent of Pyrrhonism. This is about as far as one can imagine from the typically sophistic project of constructing and promoting an identity. He is clearly interested in somehow promoting Pyrrhonism – although who he takes his readership to be is itself an interesting question, which the writings

themselves do little to resolve<sup>7</sup>. And in the course of this exercise, a certain authorial personality emerges from his writings – including, at times, a desire to show off his argumentative prowess. What he is emphatically not interested in showing off is an image of himself as an individual.

One possible explanation for the Pyrrhonists' apparently self-effacing attitude is philosophical. Unlike the Academics, the Pyrrhonists took suspension of judgement to have an important practical effect: *ataraxia*, tranquility. Sextus announces this most clearly in a one-sentence summary of Pyrrhonist skepticism near the beginning of his best-known work, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*: “The skeptical ability is one that produces oppositions among things that appear and things that are thought in any way whatsoever, one from which, because of the equal strength in the opposing objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgement, and after that to tranquility” (*PH* 1.8). Unfortunately, his explanations of why suspension of judgement has this result are not entirely consistent. On the one hand, he tells us that the skeptic starts as someone who is looking for tranquility by discovering the truth. The search for the truth is then frustrated by the fact that he keeps on encountering equally powerful opposing positions on any question, leading to suspension of judgement. But he finds, paradoxically, that this suspension of judgement itself produces the tranquility that he was seeking in the first place. Here it sounds as if the reason for the tranquility is that one has given up on a fruitless search; one yearned to know the real nature of things, one's lack of knowledge was a source of constant anxiety, and the abandonment of the attempt means that one is no longer troubled (e.g., *PH* 1.12, 26, 28-9). But whenever Sextus explicitly addresses

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<sup>7</sup> I have discussed this in Bett (forthcoming).

the question why suspension of judgement yields tranquility, he focuses on beliefs specifically about good and bad. And here the idea is that if one believes that certain things are really, or by nature, good or bad, one will think it tremendously important to have the good things and avoid the bad; hence one will be in a state of turmoil, obsessively seeking the good and warding off the bad. By contrast, someone who, because of suspension of judgement, no longer thinks of anything as good or bad in the real nature of things will simply care a great deal less about what happens; obsession and turmoil are thereby replaced by tranquility (e.g. *PH* 1.27-8, 30, 3.235-8, *M* 11.110-67). It is not clear how these two stories are supposed to be related to one another. Sextus clearly thinks they combine into a single coherent position, since at one point he treats them both together, in alternating fashion, with no suggestion of any discrepancy between the two (*PH* 1.26-30). One might well wish that he had said more about this topic.

However this may be, *ataraxia* is the skeptic's *telos* or goal (*PH* 1.25) – or rather, *ataraxia* about matters of opinion (that is, about topics one's attitude to which can be affected by philosophical discussion), coupled with *metriopatheia*, moderate feeling, about matters over which we have no such control (such as hunger, pain, etc.). And this, as I said, may help to explain why the Pyrrhonists do not seem to have been interested in cultivating a public image. If your overriding aim is to be tranquil, you will want to do as little as possible to cause trouble for yourself; in that case, putting yourself in the public spotlight might well be something you will choose to avoid. Politics is perhaps an extreme case; someone who values tranquility above all else is unlikely to care for political office. But the same could easily be true of any activity that exposed you to public judgement and, potentially, public ridicule or shaming – such as the Second

Sophistic's public displays of oratory; this kind of thing would just not fit with your plan of life. It is no accident that the Epicureans, who also had *ataraxia* as their goal – to be achieved, however, by a very different mechanism – also cultivated, at least at first, a very private and sheltered lifestyle; *lathe biôsas*, “live hidden”, was a well-known saying of Epicurus, criticized by Plutarch (*Whether “Live Hidden” is Well Said, Moralia* 1128A-1130E). The picture is admittedly more complicated in the Roman period, and the view of Epicureans as allergic to politics can certainly be overstated<sup>8</sup> (although Lucretius, too, seems to have “lived hidden”). The decision of the Epicurean Diogenes of Oenoanda (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) to erect a massive stone inscription, containing his own Epicurean writings as well as some of Epicurus' own, also suggests a certain desire for public recognition, even if only posthumously (it was constructed late in his life, according to his own words)<sup>9</sup>. But there is no denying that the ideal of *ataraxia* is at least a strong deterrent to self-promotion and to putting oneself in any public line of fire; and here the Pyrrhonists seem to have been more uncompromising than the Epicureans. Another factor may be that if one does not think that anything is in reality good or bad, one is likely to lack enthusiasm for difficult political causes; one needs to think certain things are really important if one is to exert oneself on their behalf. The skeptics' suspension of judgement on this matter (which the Epicureans do not share) is a further motivation towards quietism.

Returning now to Sextus: he has so successfully exemplified the maxim “live hidden” that virtually nothing is known about him beyond what I have already mentioned. He is generally placed in the second century CE, but the evidence is hardly

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<sup>8</sup> See Fish 2011 for a valuable corrective.

<sup>9</sup> See Smith 1992; for the reference to his age, see pages 150, 368.

decisive. The latest definitely datable person referred to in his works (who is mentioned in the past tense) is the emperor Tiberius (*PH* 1.84), so Sextus cannot have been writing earlier than the middle of the first century CE. Beyond this, the evidence, such as it is, depends on connections with other individuals, such as Diogenes Laertius, whose dates are themselves very far from certain. Clear indications as to his place of birth, or where he lived and worked in his maturity, are equally elusive. It is hard to disagree with the conclusion of one of the very few comprehensive attempts to sift the evidence concerning Sextus' life: "It is necessary to suspend judgement on Sextus' life in almost every detail"<sup>10</sup>. And so the prospects for relating Sextus with any precision to his time and place are not good.

But there is yet a further reason for this. Whatever his exact time and place, Sextus seems strikingly cut off from broader intellectual developments of his own day. For although, as just mentioned, the middle of the first century CE is the earliest one could possibly place him, the philosophers he writes about are those of the Hellenistic period and earlier. He refers to several philosophers active in the early first century BCE – Aenesidemus, the Academics Philo and Antiochus, and the Stoic Posidonius – but no one clearly later than that. The philosophical opponents on whom he concentrates the most are the Stoics, but he has no inkling of Roman Stoicism; Stoicism, for him, is primarily the school in its prime in Athens under Chrysippus, and only occasionally are later refinements mentioned (e.g., *M* 7.253ff.) He also has no idea of Platonism or Aristotelianism as live forms of philosophy in his own time (as they were, whenever exactly that was); he mentions a few Platonists from the pre-skeptical phase of the

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<sup>10</sup> House 1980, 238. See also Floridi 2002, 3-7.

Academy (Speusippus, Xenocrates, Polemo) and a few Aristotelians from the Hellenistic period (Theophrastus, Strato, Critolaus), but no one post-Hellenistic. Nor does he have any idea of writers in roughly his own time (as Plutarch and Favorinus may very well have been) who undertook what they presented as a revival of the thinking of the skeptical Academy. From Sextus' perspective it looks as if the clock stops in philosophy – with the exception of the Pyrrhonist movement itself – at around 75 BCE<sup>11</sup>.

This peculiar isolation from his own place and time simply compounds the difficulty of saying anything informative that might relate Sextus to the culture in which he lived. What we can do, however, is look at a specific instance of this isolation that is relevant to one of the main concerns of this volume. To put this in context, a word is needed about Sextus' surviving works. His best known work, as already mentioned, is *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, which consists of a general introduction to the Pyrrhonist outlook (Book 1), plus a critical examination of theories in the standard three areas of

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<sup>11</sup> David Sedley has argued that this is a much broader phenomenon; see Sedley 2003. He cites several other authors besides Sextus – Diogenes Laertius, Seneca, Plutarch, Diogenes of Oenoanda and Philodemus – who also treat the history of philosophy as ending in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, and he connects this with the demise of Athens as the center of philosophy, and the related dispersal of school libraries to other parts of the Greco-Roman world. After this, he argues, philosophy – at least, as viewed by its practitioners at the time – becomes largely a matter of “recovering and understanding the wisdom of the ancients” (36). While I find Sedley's argument generally cogent, I do not think it sufficient to explain Sextus' silence about his own time. For Pyrrhonism, as Sedley himself notes, was never an Athenian school; besides, whatever may be true of the other authors Sedley cites, Sextus clearly sees himself as a participant in an ongoing philosophy, which is a rival to other philosophies, rather than as a preserver of ancient wisdom. While the character of his summaries of the views of other schools may very well be due to the phenomenon to which Sedley draws attention – he is drawing on sources that themselves treat those schools as not continuing to innovate beyond the early 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE – this does not eliminate the mystery of his apparent lack of interest in what was going on around him, philosophically speaking. Nor does it explain his similar lack of knowledge of and interest in the recent history of rhetoric, to which I turn in the next paragraph; for Athens did not have the same kind of monopoly on rhetorical teaching and theory, prior to the early 1<sup>st</sup> century, as it had on philosophy.

philosophy in the Hellenistic period – logic, physics and ethics (Books 2 and 3). Then there is another, partially surviving work doing the same things at much greater length; the general portion of this work is lost, and the surviving portions consist of two books *Against the Logicians*, two *Against the Physicists* and one *Against the Ethicists*. We also have a third work of Sextus in six books, each directed against some specialized field of inquiry. The second of these six books is *Against the Rhetoricians*, and this is the one on which I will focus. Now, one might expect that a book with this title would be concerned with forms of rhetoric prominent in the author’s own day; and, whenever exactly Sextus lived, if this had been his concern, the rhetorical activities characteristic of the Second Sophistic would surely have occupied much of his attention. In fact, however, we see nothing of the kind.

*Against the Rhetoricians* begins with a reference to rhetoric as primarily exercised in political and judicial contexts (*ep’agoras kai bêmatôn*, *M* 2.1). There follow brief discussions of definitions of rhetoric offered by Plato (2-5), his student Xenocrates and the Stoics (6-7), and Aristotle (8-9). Most of the remainder of the book is then devoted to arguments for two connected conclusions: rhetoric is not a genuine *technê* or expertise, and rhetoric does not exist. The connection between the two points is that if there were genuinely to be such a thing as rhetoric, it would have to qualify as a *technê*; hence Sextus freely switches between the two conclusions, treating them as interchangeable. As in much of Sextus’ surviving work, the arguments vary in quality and persuasiveness, but they are mostly organized around several themes: rhetoric is not a *technê* because it has no clear use (20-47); it does not exist because it has no clear subject-matter (48-59); and it does not exist, or is not a *technê* (both are stated almost simultaneously, 60)

because it has no clear *telos* or end – nothing can be clearly specified as “what it is for” (60-87). Throughout the discussion the assumption persists that rhetoric is typically employed to influence assemblies or juries. This is broadened in the final section (89-112), where the three parts of rhetoric distinguished by Aristotle – judicial, deliberative (i.e., political) and focused on praise (“encomiastic”)<sup>12</sup> – are each introduced, and there follow brief arguments for the impossibility of each. The book concludes with an objection to all three parts that appeals to arguments elsewhere in Sextus’ oeuvre against the possibility of demonstration – something that rhetoric surely depends on (106-112).

What is striking about this entire book is the complete absence of any contemporary context. Nothing in Sextus’ descriptions of how rhetoric operates would not be at home in the classical period, and his opening reference to Plato’s *Gorgias* (2) positively encourages one to think of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE. He mentions the Peripatetic Critolaus (12, 20, also 61, where “his friend Aristo” – presumably the Peripatetic Aristo of Ceos – is also mentioned), as well as Clitomachus and Charmadas, both Academics of the late second century BCE (20); we also hear of the second century BCE rhetorical theorists Hermagoras and Athenaeus (62) – juxtaposed, however, with Plato, Xenocrates and Isocrates (61-2). But these are the latest datable figures referred to; Sextus’ consistent practice of not mentioning any philosopher later than the early first century BCE is precisely paralleled by his references to writers on rhetoric. As for practising orators, the named examples are Demosthenes (40), his contemporary Demades (16), Aeschines (40), and Corax, the supposed originator of systematic oratory (96-9) in the fifth century BCE. The subjects of incidental anecdotes are also distinctly

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<sup>12</sup> Aristotle actually speaks of this part as directed to praise *or blame* (*Rhetoric* 1.9). But by far the greater portion of his attention is given to the former.

archaic: Lycurgus (21), Tissaphernes (22), Plato the Old Comedian (35), and the Areopagus “in ancient times” (*to palaion*, 77).

The point is clear enough: Sextus shows no sign of having any awareness of a flourishing rhetorical culture in his own day. Now, it may be said that one characteristic of the Second Sophistic itself is a tendency not to focus on contemporary authors, and to regard the Greek literary universe as something from an earlier period<sup>13</sup>. But the leading figures of the Second Sophistic were certainly aware of each others’ existence, and wrote in response to what their contemporaries wrote; even if they focused on the Greek past, in doing so they were engaged in a highly sophisticated form of rivalry with one another. Sextus, by contrast, seems to have no idea that the Second Sophistic even exists.

Recall, too, that the title of his book is *Against the Rhetoricians*. He is not himself engaged in a rhetorical exercise (as he himself conceives it, at any rate); rather, his goal is to *undermine* rhetoric. For someone with this purpose, entirely ignoring its contemporary practitioners would seem a perverse strategy; his readers, whether sympathetic or not, could reasonably object that he is missing the target, or at least one target. As we saw, most of Sextus’ book has to do with judicial and deliberative oratory; yet the oratory of the Second Sophistic was not delivered before political assemblies or law courts. Of course, opportunities also still existed in the period of the Second Sophistic for rhetorical skill to be exercised in political and judicial settings, and Philostratus’ *Lives of the Sophists* contains frequent references to these; but Sextus shows no apparent knowledge of contemporary manifestations of political or judicial oratory, either. As for epideictic oratory, the category that, of Aristotle’s three, seems to have the

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<sup>13</sup> I thank the editors for raising this point and encouraging me to reformulate my presentation in light of it.

most overlap with the activities of the Second Sophistic, Sextus gives it very short shrift, merely arguing that a genuine understanding of whom to praise or blame, and on what grounds, would require knowledge (about the inner dispositions of the people concerned, or about the real nature of good and bad) that no one can be expected to have (101-5). One suspects that the leading Second Sophistic practitioners, renowned for extemporaneous speaking on themes (whether of praise or blame or anything else) proposed to them by the audience, and skilled at tailoring their speeches to the particularities of the audience and the moment, would simply have laughed at this<sup>14</sup>. The fact that someone as practiced in argument as Sextus should have left himself so exposed to such criticisms suggests, again, that his complete lack of reference to the rhetoric of his own day is not a matter of policy, but a matter of ignorance.

As we have seen, his treatment of rhetoric is just one example of a general phenomenon in Sextus' writing. Now, the one apparent exception to this phenomenon of Sextus being in a profound sense unconnected with his own time is the section of the first book of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in which he explains why skepticism – by which he means Pyrrhonism – is not the same as various other philosophies that have been taken to be equivalent or importantly similar to it (1.210-41). Clearly these claims of equivalence or resemblance cannot have been made until Pyrrhonism existed as a distinct philosophical tradition capable of being compared with other preexisting philosophies; and so here we do seem to have a case of Sextus engaging with critics or commentators

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<sup>14</sup> The best example from Philostratus' *Lives of the Sophists* is perhaps his story of Alexander "Clay Plato" and Herodes Atticus giving successive speeches to audiences including each other, and exquisitely adapting their presentations so as to impress each other (VS 572-4). But Philostratus makes frequent reference to individual Sophists' skill at extemporaneous speaking; see, e.g., VS 519 (Scopelian), 527 (Lollianus of Ephesus), 612 (Hermocrates).

of his own day. The first of the claimed similarities is between skepticism and the philosophy of Heraclitus (1.210-12), and this Sextus attributes to the founder of the later Pyrrhonist tradition, Aenesidemus; somewhat surprisingly, he argues strongly against the suggestion, calling it absurd (*atopon*, 212)<sup>15</sup>. Otherwise we are simply told that a certain philosophy “is said” (*legetai*, 1.213) or “is thought” (*dokei*, 1.217) to be similar to or the same as Pyrrhonism, or that “some people” (*tines*, 1.215, 220, 236) say so. Presumably the proponents of these claims are distinct from Aenesidemus, and Sextus certainly makes it sound as if they are contemporaries whose views he is anxious to refute, thereby asserting the autonomy of Pyrrhonism. The last case – Pyrrhonism’s relation to medical Empiricism (1.236-41) – sounds like an internal dispute; as we saw, Sextus himself is identified as an Empiricist, and he is not the only Pyrrhonist of whom this is true<sup>16</sup>. But in the other cases, we really have no idea who Sextus is arguing against<sup>17</sup>. In fact, given his tendency to dwell in the past, we cannot even be sure that they are his contemporaries; they could belong to any period between his own and that of Aenesidemus, who first put Pyrrhonism on the map. So it is not even obvious that this is indeed an exception to his usual silence about everything subsequent to the early first century BCE. But even if it is, this is of very little use, since he gives us no clue as to who these unnamed *tines* are.

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<sup>15</sup> This is not the only place in Sextus where a connection is suggested between Aenesidemus and Heraclitus. For recent discussions of this perplexing topic, see Hankinson 2010, Schofield 2007, Polito 2004.

<sup>16</sup> On this relations between Pyrrhonism and the medical schools, see most recently Allen 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Annas and Barnes 1994/2000, 54, n.221, say that Diogenes Laertius 9.72 ascribes to the skeptics themselves the view that skepticism and the philosophy of Democritus are similar. This is a mistake. The *autous*, “them”, of 9.72 has the same reference as the *enioi*, “some people”, of 9.71; Diogenes, like Sextus, attributes this claim of similarity to an unnamed group.

The school that Sextus spends the most time on in this section is the Academy – including both Plato himself and what I have been calling the skeptical Academy (1.220-35). Now, as we saw, Favorinus seems to have had a project of bringing Academic and Pyrrhonist skepticism into alignment; if so, Sextus, who sees the Academics (with the partial exception of Arcesilaus) as very different from the Pyrrhonists, would have had a very different attitude from Favorinus. Given this conflict of opinion, Leofranc Holford-Strevens has made the ingenious suggestion that the unnamed source of the view Sextus opposes – namely, that the Academic and the Pyrrhonist philosophies are the same – is Favorinus himself<sup>18</sup>. He is properly tentative about this, and I too must admit that I cannot show he is wrong. However, if Sextus' target was Favorinus, one might have expected him to acknowledge the revival of Academic skepticism that Favorinus himself represents; indeed, emphasizing Favorinus' self-styled role as an Academic, and showing how different Pyrrhonism is from this, might well have been an effective form of refutation. Yet, as we have seen, for Sextus the Academy appears to end, as the history of philosophy in general (except for Pyrrhonism) appears to end, in the early first century BCE; Sextus never mentions Favorinus any more than he mentions other philosophers beyond that date. And so I am inclined to doubt that Sextus is responding directly to Favorinus, even though I certainly cannot propose any definite alternative.

Be that as it may, the general verdict is clear: Sextus Empiricus, and the Pyrrhonist movement in general, appear to have led an extremely secluded existence. While Pyrrhonism was in the period covered by this volume, it seems to have been, in a very real sense, not of it. I have tried to say a little to explain this phenomenon; but

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<sup>18</sup> Holford-Strevens 1997.

ultimately, given that it reveals itself to us by means of a profound lack of information, one cannot do much more than note it with interest. Sextus Empiricus had an important influence on the direction taken by philosophy in the early modern period; and many contemporary philosophers still take him very seriously. But his standing in the ancient world would not have given us any reason to expect this.

### **Bibliographical Note**

A good general survey of ancient skepticism is Thorsrud 2009. Bett 2010, a collection of essays, is more comprehensive but still accessible. Both contain extensive bibliographies of both primary and secondary materials, organized by topics. On the difference between the Academics and the Pyrrhonists, see in particular Striker 2010. On the demise of the skeptical Academy and the rise of Pyrrhonism with Aenesidemus, see the works cited in nn.1, 2 and 3.

Favorinus' philosophical side is well treated in Holford-Strevens 1997; see also Ioppolo 1993 and (for a very concise discussion) Lévy 2010, 96-8. Good recent work on the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus includes Perin 2010 and the essays in Machuca 2011a; see also the ancient portion of Machuca 2011b – and the rest of this volume for some indication of Sextus' wide-ranging influence in modern philosophy. On the Pyrrhonian Modes see Annas and Barnes 1985, Barnes 1990, Woodruff 2010.

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