

The Cyrenaics and Skepticism

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1. Should the Cyrenaics Count as Skeptics?

The Cyrenaics are regularly described as having a skeptical epistemology.¹ But some would say that the Cyrenaics do not belong in a volume on skepticism. Prominent among them would be the Pyrrhonist skeptic Sextus Empiricus. At the end of the first book of his Outlines of Pyrrhonism, Sextus discusses several philosophies that were thought to be equivalent or at least similar to skepticism. It is not clear who thought so; were they skeptics themselves, or adherents of some other philosophical outlook? But Sextus is opposed to the whole project, arguing in each case that there are central differences between skepticism as he understands it and the philosophy in question. And one of these philosophies is that of the Cyrenaics (PH 1.215).

Sextus points to two differences. First, the Cyrenaics posit pleasure as the end or aim (τέλος) of life, whereas the skeptic's end is ἀταραξία, freedom from worry; referring to his earlier chapter on the skeptic's end (PH 1.25–30), Sextus counters that a firm conviction that pleasure is the end will (whether or not one actually achieves it) lead to a great deal of trouble—that is, the opposite of ἀταραξία. The earlier chapter did not actually mention the specific case of pleasure, but argued that taking anything to be by nature good or bad, and thereby caring intensely about its presence or absence, will lead to turmoil; the same point can be found elsewhere (PH 3.235–238, AM 11.110–140). There are really two distinct issues here: the identity of the ends posited by each school, and the ways in which they are posited. First, pleasure and ἀταραξία are two different things, so the Cyrenaics do not have the same end as the skeptics. But second, holding to one's view of the end (whatever one takes it to be) as a matter of firm

conviction (in the present passage, διαβεβαιούμενος) will lead to results that are actually contrary to the skeptic's end. The Cyrenaics are assumed to adopt their end in this committed way. By contrast, when Sextus states the skeptics' own end, he is careful to put it much less decisively. He says "Up to now we say that the skeptic's end is freedom from worry" (PH 1.25).² Rather than being posited, as ends usually are, as the end for human beings in general—as what humans as such should, or naturally do, strive towards—it is explicitly restricted to the skeptics themselves; and it is put forward tentatively, as a matter of their experience "up to now," rather than definitively. In both respects it conforms to the suspension of judgment (ἐποχή) that Sextus regularly identifies as the centerpiece of his skeptical attitude.

The centrality of suspension of judgment for the Pyrrhonist skeptic is also the basis of the second contrast Sextus draws between his school and the Cyrenaics. Here and elsewhere, Sextus distinguishes between the way objects strike us and the objects themselves, and says that concerning the latter, here referred to as "the external underlying things" (τῶν ἔκτὸς ὑποκειμένων), the skeptics suspend judgment,³ whereas the Cyrenaics "declare that they have an inapprehensible nature." The Cyrenaics, then, assert that these objects are inherently unknowable, and that is an intellectual commitment, just as much as if one were to claim that they could be known; in modern scholarship, though Sextus does not use this terminology himself, such a position is generally called "negative dogmatism," and Sextus is clear that this is different from skepticism. Now, the other side of this distinction—what I referred to as "the way things strike us"—is what led, as Sextus reports it, to the claim that the Cyrenaic position is the same as skepticism; the reason given is that "it too [i.e., skepticism] says that only the ways we are affected [πρόθη] are apprehended," just as the Cyrenaics did.⁴ Sextus does not necessarily endorse this characterization of skepticism; it is presented

simply as the support offered by those who claim the identity. In fact, as I shall suggest in closing, he would be well advised not to endorse it; even here, the Cyrenaic and the skeptical positions are not identical. But his point in drawing this second contrast is that, even if we accept the supposed point of similarity, the Cyrenaics differ importantly from the skeptics in what they are prepared to say about the objects themselves.

So Sextus, a card-carrying skeptic, explicitly repudiates the idea that the Cyrenaics are skeptics. Why, then, should we treat them as skeptics? The answer is that skepticism has taken numerous different forms in the history of philosophy. Although the Cyrenaic position may differ in crucial ways from skepticism as understood in the ancient period—the hallmark of which, both in Sextus’s hands and elsewhere, was suspension of judgment of one form or another—anyone approaching the Cyrenaics with a background in reflections about skepticism in the modern period will immediately see their philosophy as having a strong skeptical component. For skepticism in the modern period has generally been regarded as centering around the denial of the possibility of knowledge in some domain: about the “external world,” about other minds, about induction, and so on. As we have already noted, the Cyrenaics, if Sextus is right, hold something that clearly has at least a family resemblance with external world skepticism; we shall also see hints of a position resembling other minds skepticism. So to the extent that the Cyrenaics qualify as skeptics, it is in an anachronistic fashion, because of the resemblance of some of their views to views that would now be called “skeptical,” not because of anything that would have been recognized as skepticism in the ancient world.

How close the Cyrenaic position is even to varieties of skepticism discussed today is an interesting and subtle question; I shall suggest in what follows that we should be careful not to try to assimilate them too closely. If I am right about this last

point, then the Cyrenaics serve as an illuminating foil to skepticism in both the ancient and the modern periods. In order to develop this line of thought, however, we need to look more closely at what the Cyrenaic position actually was. I shall say no more about their ideas on pleasure, nor will I address the very interesting questions surrounding their picture of the relation between pleasure and happiness,⁵ except to say that this side of their thought seems to reveal the same tendency to restrict their concerns to what is immediately accessible to experience as we find in their epistemological ideas. It is the latter on which I shall concentrate from now on.

2. The View in More Detail

The passage of Sextus referred to in the previous section attributes to the Cyrenaics the view that only the *πάθη*, and not the objects causing them, are or can be apprehended (PH 1.215). We find the same attribution in another, considerably longer passage of Sextus in which the Cyrenaic view is summarized (AM 7.191–200—on the present point see especially 191, 195); this is a section of Sextus’s lengthy review, in the first book of *Against the Logicians*, of positions, positive and negative, concerning the criterion of truth. Several other authors also cite them as holding that only the *πάθη* can be apprehended: the Anonymous Commentator on the *Theaetetus* (on 152b, col. 65, 29–39), Aristocles of Messene in a passage on the Cyrenaics quoted by Eusebius (*Praep. evang.* 19.1–2), Eusebius himself in introducing this passage (*Praep. evang.* 18.31),⁶ and Diogenes Laertius in his life of Aristippus (DL 2.92). Despite the close verbal agreement among all these passages, there is room for some doubt as to whether the terminology of apprehension (*κατάληψις*) goes back to the Cyrenaics’ own original formulation of the position. As far as we can tell, this terminology was first given an epistemological connotation by Zeno of Citium, the first Stoic (Cicero, *Acad.* 2.145).

Now, there is an unresolved debate (and the evidence may be insufficient to settle this) over whether the Cyrenaics' epistemology was part of their position from its beginning with the older Aristippus, a disciple of Socrates, or was added later—probably by his grandson, also named Aristippus.⁷ But although the older Aristippus's precise dates are uncertain, and those of his grandson even more so, it is clear that both must have predated Zeno, whose birthdate is generally placed in the later 330s BCE.⁸ Hence, if the report that Zeno invented κατάληψις as a philosophical term is correct, the Cyrenaic view is likely to have been developed too early to make use of it. By the time of the authors who are our sources, it was no longer restricted to Stoicism, but was common philosophical parlance for any kind of secure cognitive awareness; and this would explain why it became standard in describing the Cyrenaic position, even if the Cyrenaics themselves did not use this language.

However, this need not trouble us, since what is clearly the same position is also reported to us without the language of apprehension.⁹ Plutarch tells us that the Cyrenaics saw each πάθος as “having its own evidence [ἔνάργειαν] within itself, which is not to be challenged” (*Adv. Col.* 1120E). In Hellenistic and later philosophical contexts, ἐνάργεια regularly indicates something's being a matter of plain and incontrovertible experience, and hence it plays a role equivalent to that of apprehension in the other passages: it specifies that there is no room for doubt or dispute about how these πάθη come across to us.¹⁰ By contrast, Plutarch says that they “thought that the assurance [πίστιν] coming from them [i.e., from the πάθη] was not sufficient for firm declarations about the objects”—that is, the objects causing those πάθη (1120D); examples are whether honey is sweet, an olive-shoot bitter, hail cold, wine warm, the sun bright, or night dark (1120E). Similarly, Cicero tells us that the Cyrenaics held that “they do not know what has which color or which sound, but only sense that they are

affected in a certain way” (Acad. 2.76.).¹¹ The outlines of the view, then, are clear enough: we can have a certain kind of secure grasp of something about the πάθη themselves, but the objects that caused them are not amenable to any such grasp. It is now time to get clearer about what this amounts to.

First of all, what is a πάθος? Most generally, it is something that happens to someone or something, or that someone or something undergoes. Most often, but certainly not always, it is human beings who are described as having πάθη, and this is clearly true for the Cyrenaics; it is our own πάθη of which we are said to have apprehension. In human contexts the word is frequently translated “emotions,” “passions,” or “feelings”; these can often be appropriate, but in the present case they are too narrow. From the texts already adduced, it is clear that the πάθη include cases of ordinary sense-perception, with no particular affective component; this is suggested by the frequent talk of the external objects (the character of which we cannot apprehend) versus our πάθη of them, and is confirmed by the examples from Plutarch and Cicero in the previous paragraph. Indeed, these appear to be the cases of most immediate interest for our purposes, although pleasure and pain are also included by the Cyrenaics among the πάθη (Sextus, AM 7.199, DL 2.86, Cic. Acad. 2.76). Above, in an attempt to capture this diversity, I translated πάθη as “ways we are affected”; it is not clear that any single English word will do.¹² From now on I will simply use the Greek word.

What, then, is apprehended on the Cyrenaic view, and what cannot be apprehended? On the side of the objects, it seems clear enough that we cannot apprehend the objects’ real or intrinsic character; we can know how we are affected by these objects, but not how they are in themselves.¹³ And it may seem that the answer on the side of the subject having the πάθη is equally clear: one apprehends, or has infallible access to, one’s own subjective experience of these objects. This may also seem to be

supported by Sextus’s talk of the πάθη as “apparent” (φαινόμενα) to us (AM 7.194, 197).¹⁴ But the other sources do not use this language, and it may well be that Sextus is translating the Cyrenaics’ position into language with which he himself, and his assumed audience, are familiar (so Tsouna 1998: chapter 4.V).

Sextus also reports the Cyrenaic view using a different form of language; the same form of words also appears in Plutarch’s report, and Plutarch explicitly claims to be giving the view as the Cyrenaics themselves present it—by contrast with the Epicurean Colotes, whom he criticizes for misrepresenting it (Adv. Col. 1120D–E). According to these sources, in characterizing the πάθη the Cyrenaics said that we are “sweetened,” “whitened,” “reddened,” “chilled,” “heated,” etc. (AM 7.192–193, Adv. Col. 1120E); in what appears to be interchangeable terminology, Sextus also has them saying that we are “affected [or “activated”, κινεῖται] yellowly,” “redly,” etc. (AM 7.192, 198). Now, to say that we are “sweetened” or “whitened” does not seem the most natural language to use if one wanted to talk purely about experiencing something as sweet or white. Rather, it sounds as if something in us is being said to turn sweet or white.¹⁵ And this recalls another, roughly contemporary account of sense-perception—at least as some scholars have read it. On one interpretation of Aristotle’s account of sense-perception,¹⁶ the sense-organs actually acquire, when one perceives, the sensory qualities belonging to the objects of sense-perception; for example, the interior of one’s eye turns red when one sees a red tomato. Whether or not this is right about Aristotle, it seems a natural reading of the Cyrenaic terminology—thinking now, of course, about the perceiver’s side alone. For someone to be “reddened” is for something in that person to become red, the sense-organ for vision being the obvious candidate; and the same would be true, mutatis mutandis, for “sweetened,” “chilled,” and the rest. The other

language in Sextus (“affected redly,” etc.) does not point so clearly in this direction, but seems at least compatible with the reading just suggested.

This reading might be challenged on the ground that the peculiar verbal forms reported in our sources extend considerably beyond the kind of basic sensory properties considered so far. Plutarch’s report includes the claim that the Cyrenaics also spoke of being “walled,” “horsed,” or “manned” (Adv. Col. 1120D). Now it would be hard to understand these other than as shorthand for “experience a perception as of a wall/horse/man”; that perceiving subjects in any sense become walls, horses, or men during these perceptions would surely be absurd. However, there is good reason not to accept this account of what the Cyrenaics said. Plutarch presents these terms as coming from Colotes’s portrait of the Cyrenaic view, which he says was offered in a spirit of mockery (κωμωδῶν, 1120D) and which, as noted above, he explicitly rejects, contrasting it with his own account of what the Cyrenaics actually said, where only sensory properties are included. No other evidence includes these outlandish terms, which one would expect to have excited broader ridicule if they had really been part of the view.¹⁷ Sextus’s summary does say that “the person who presses on his eye is activated as if by two things,” and goes on to use the verb “doubled” to express this (AM 7.192–193); here is another purported Cyrenaic coinage outside the range of sensory properties, and given Plutarch’s evidence we may find this suspect as well. But, unlike in the case of “walled,” etc., it is not hard to understand “doubled” as referring to an actual change in the sense-organ; pressing on your eye might well be thought to divide the material inside into two. Indeed, the reference to pressing on the eye may even support the general reading of these verbs as referring to physiological changes rather than to subjective experiences.

If this is indeed what the Cyrenaics mean, we need not deny that they are interested in the experience of tasting something as sweet or seeing it as white; in speaking of the *πάθη* as apprehensible (or whatever equivalent terms they actually used), they clearly have in mind our grasp of something of which we are subjectively aware.¹⁸ Rather, the point is that they do not have a sharp distinction, such as is taken for granted in Descartes and much early modern philosophy, between mental and physical occurrences. One tastes something as sweet, and that thing turns one's tongue sweet. Are these the very same event described in two different ways? There is no indication in the sources that the Cyrenaics have any concern to distinguish them. And if not, then our *πάθη*, the ways we are affected by objects, are not purely mental events; they are also effects on our bodies. By the same token, they are not purely subjective, but also things happening in the world, describable from a third-person perspective.¹⁹ And this is one reason why one should not try to assimilate the Cyrenaics too closely to the typical figure of "the skeptic" in modern philosophy. While it is not false that the Cyrenaics deny that we can know about the external world, "external" in this case means "external to our bodies," not "external to our subjective awareness."²⁰

Another reason why it is hazardous to assimilate the Cyrenaics to the modern skeptic is that they do not seem to question the existence of the external world (in any sense of "external"). Instead, the question is consistently whether we know what the objects causing our *πάθη* are like. Their answer is that we do not know this; but that there are objects out there, to which our *πάθη* are somehow a response, is taken for granted. For example, Sextus tells us that, on the Cyrenaic view, "that we are whitened and we are sweetened, it is possible to say ... irrefutably; but that the thing productive of the effect is white or sweet, it is not possible to assert" (AM 7.191). And Aristocles reports that "they said that, when being burned or cut, they knew that they were affected

in some way; but whether the thing burning them was fire or the thing cutting them was iron, they were not able to say” (in Eusebius, Praep. evang. 14.19.1). Sextus’s report once seems to show them inching towards a question about existence; he says that “the external thing productive of the effect is perhaps (τάχα) a being, but it is not apparent to us” (AM 7.194). But there is no indication that they ever followed through on that suggestion and explicitly raised the question.²¹ One might say that this is simply a failure to see where the logic of their position was leading them. But if, as I have suggested, the πάθη are physiological events as much as experiences, it is not perhaps surprising; a view according to which there were human bodies, but maybe no world for them to inhabit, would be a strange view indeed. So if it is true that “external” means something different for the Cyrenaics from what it means for a Cartesian, this is not unconnected with their focus on the nature of external objects rather than their existence.

In addition to doubts about our knowledge of the world around us, Sextus’s report includes doubts about our knowledge of the πάθη of others, which seems to anticipate what is today called “skepticism about other minds.” No other source mentions this, but it is hard to see why Sextus would simply invent it in the course of a description of what the Cyrenaics say. It appears to be introduced as part of the argument for external objects being inapprehensible; the idea seems to be that we cannot tell what objects are like because we cannot compare our πάθη with those of others and confirm that they are qualitatively the same (AM 7.196–197). One may wonder why, even if we could do this, it would give us knowledge of the way things are; might not all humans see things distortedly?²³ But I am not sure the argument has to deny this; the idea may be that, since we cannot even tell whether we see things the same way as others—which, even if we could, might not be enough—the prospects for

getting to a secure grasp of the nature of those things are truly hopeless. In any case, Sextus says that according to the Cyrenaics, “each person grasps the πάθος that is his own,” but that since we do not grasp each others’ πάθη, “it is rash to say that what appears a certain way to me also appears that way to the next person.” If our own πάθη are all we can be sure about, it is indeed not hard to see how the πάθη of others might be judged just as elusive as the character of the objects that produce them. But again, just as the existence of the external world does not seem to be an issue for the Cyrenaics, nor is there any hint of solipsism. Nothing in this passage suggests any doubt that there are other minds; what goes on in them is the question. Again, part of the reason for this may be that the πάθη are, as I put it earlier, not purely mental,²⁴ but the connection is not as obvious as in the case of the external world.

So the Cyrenaics interestingly anticipate what in modern times has been called skepticism about the external world, and also, if Sextus is to be believed, skepticism about other minds. There are also interesting and important differences. But certainly they are much closer to these modern forms of skepticism than are any other ancient thinkers—including, to return to my opening point, the ancient thinkers who called themselves skeptics. Finally, we can now see why Sextus ought to distinguish himself from the Cyrenaics not only, as he says, on the inapprehensibility of external things, but also on the apprehensibility of the πάθη, which was the point on which those who wished to assimilate the two schools were said to rely (PH 1.215). Sextus does not question the way things appear to him; indeed, he says that this is not a topic for discussion (PH 1.22). But this is not the same as asserting that a whole class of items, the πάθη, can be infallibly known about—which is what the claim of apprehensibility amounts to; that would be a theoretical claim.²⁵ The Cyrenaics have an epistemological doctrine of which apprehensibility of the πάθη, and the inapprehensibility of their

objects, are interconnected parts; both should equally be anathema to Sextus. True skeptics in the ancient sense are not philosophers, in any usual sense of the term; the Cyrenaics are.

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¹ See, e.g., Matson (2006) and Taylor (2012), both in standard reference works.

² Translations are my own.

³ The sentence also contains the difficult phrase $\square\square\square\square \square\pi\square \square\square \square\square\square\square$: “as far as the argument goes,” “as far as reason is concerned”? However precisely one translates it, the point seems to be that the skeptic makes no attempt to theorize about the nature of these “external” objects. See Brunschwig (1994: 250).

⁴ I shall return to the question of what the $\pi\square\square\square$ are and how the word should be translated; the somewhat cumbersome translation “ways we are affected” is intended as a place-holder until that point.

⁵ On this, see especially DL 2.87–88, and for two partially differing interpretations, see O’Keefe (2002) and Tsouna-McKirahan (2002).

⁶ On this division of the text between Eusebius and Aristocles, see Chiesara (2001: fragment F5 and Introduction, section II, especially xxvi–xxviii).

⁷ In this essay, for reasons of space, I do not attempt to address the history of the school or possible differences among individual members. Our sources in any case consistently report Cyrenaic epistemology as adopted by the school in general (unlike their ethics, where we hear of a number of individual differences—see especially DL 2.93–100); the only question is whether it was part of their philosophy from the start.

⁸ The evidence on the older Aristippus’s chronology is conflicting and hard to interpret; see Giannantoni (1990: Note 13, vol. 4, 135–140), and for the ancient sources, Giannantoni (1990: vol. 2, section IV-A). There are no precise chronological indications for the younger Aristippus. But someone who was an adult in Socrates’s lifetime must have been born no later than the 420s, which almost certainly puts the younger Aristippus at least a generation earlier than Zeno.

¹⁴ See, however, Everson (1991), which argues that even the category of the apparent, in the hands of the Pyrrhonists, should not be construed in subjectivist terms. For some well-founded doubts about this, see Fine (2003), especially section 6.

¹⁵ Diego Machuca commented that the point may simply be to put the focus on the ways in which one is affected, and to avoid any reference to the causes. I quite agree that this is the intention. But *what are* the ways in which one is affected? This peculiar form of language suggests that the Cyrenaics mean to identify something other than pure subjective experience. The account that I go on to sketch seems to me the most natural way to make sense of this idiosyncratic terminology; given the state of our evidence, it would be rash to claim anything stronger.

¹⁶ E.g., Ross (1923: 137), Sorabji (1974).

¹⁷ Here I follow Kechagia (2011: chapter 8.2). Tsouna (1998: chapter 6.III) also rejects Colotes's picture.

¹⁸ My account is thus not inconsistent with that of Fine (2003), section 5. Fine's focus is on the subjective aspect of the Cyrenaics' πάθη; her concern is to rebut the idea, stemming from Burnyeat (1982), that ancient Greek philosophy does not recognize a category of the subjective that is anything like that which we find in philosophy since Descartes. I think that she is successful in this aim. But Fine does not deny that these πάθη are also physical states, though she is not particularly interested in their character.

¹⁹ Of course, whether these events could ever be reliably observed from a third-person perspective is put in doubt by the other side of the Cyrenaic position, that the objects causing the π□□□ are not apprehensible. That you are "reddened" may be apprehensible to you, and this may have an objective aspect (your eye's turning red) as well as a subjective one (something's looking red to you). But your being reddened is

not apprehensible to anyone else, because to everyone else your eye's turning red is not a $\pi\alpha\theta\eta$, but an external event.

²⁰ That the conception of one's body as "external" originates with Descartes is not a new idea; it was first made prominent in Burnyeat (1982).

²¹ Another passage of Sextus (AM 6.53) claims that the Cyrenaics thought that only the $\pi\alpha\theta\eta$ exist, which sounds like an outright denial, not just a questioning, of the existence of the external world. But this is in a polemical context in which some highly dubious claims are also made about Plato and Democritus; it should almost certainly be discounted. See Tsouna (1998: 80–81) and Bett (2013: 177–178).

²³ Tsouna (1998: chapter 7) raises this objection and then explores alternative interpretations.

²⁴ Tsouna (1998: 93–95) has some suggestions in that direction.

²⁵ On this, see further O'Keefe (2011). Perin (2010) argues that Sextus takes us to have non-inferential knowledge of how things appear to us. (Fine (2003: 209) also considers this possibility, but is uncertain.) But, first, this is an inference from other things that he says; he certainly does not say anything that could be translated by these words. What we think an ancient philosopher was committed to holding may not always correspond to what that ancient philosopher actually held. Second, even if we accept Perin's view, it does not follow that Sextus would or should be comfortable with the dogmatic notion of apprehension; one can claim in a commonsense way to know things (even non-inferentially, as in "I just know it"), without having or wishing to have any precise commitments concerning what that amounts to. Both Perin (2010: 160) and Fine (2003: 208) draw attention to the fact that Sextus reports the view of those who would assimilate the Cyrenaics to the skeptics with the words "it too says that only the $\pi\alpha\theta\eta$ are apprehended," and does not reject the implication that this is the skeptic's view.

However, as I noted earlier, he also does not endorse this implication; and my claim here is that he is well-advised not to do so.