

The Ancient Greek Sceptics' Practice and its Relation to Truth

I

The idea of *philosophy as a way of life* has attracted considerable interest in recent years. It is undeniable that at many times and places in history, philosophy has been viewed as something not just to be thought about, but also to be lived. The conception of ancient Greek philosophy, in particular, as a way of life – and of modern philosophy, with a few notable exceptions, as having regrettably abandoned this – was especially prominent in the work of the French scholar Pierre Hadot. While Hadot may have overgeneralized the case – the practical dimension is surely more prominent in some philosophers, and in some areas of philosophy, than in others – he put his finger on an important, recurring, and previously somewhat underestimated feature of ancient Greek thought¹.

One aspect of this is a certain practical constraint on one's philosophy that was taken for granted in antiquity: any philosophy worthy of serious consideration must be capable of being incorporated into a life. And this in turn, according to many Greek philosophers, imposed on us a requirement to take certain things as true. A striking case is Aristotle's discussion of the Law of Non-Contradiction. He argues that any coherent form of speech or thought requires that one accept it. But he also argues that no form of *human life* is compatible with denying the Law of Non-Contradiction (as numerous philosophers, according to him, claimed to do); any choice of how to act depends on taking certain things to be the case, and not also their opposites. One

¹ Hadot's main work in this area, translated into English, is Hadot (1995). Another major work on the topic, avowedly inspired by Hadot but taking a very different approach, is Cooper (2012).

stops at a precipice, for example, because one takes there to be a precipice rather than its opposite, flat ground; one also takes it that falling over the precipice would be bad rather than its opposite, good (*Met.* 1008b14-19). For the purpose of delivering the desired conclusion, namely that denying the Law of Non-Contradiction is impossible, the argument about living a life and the argument about the conditions for speaking and thinking are treated as equally relevant and equally weighty².

Another context in which this “livability” constraint was important is skepticism and the objections raised against it by the Greek skeptics’ contemporaries, primarily the Epicureans and the Stoics. Both schools insisted that certain things must be taken as true if human life is to be possible. One of Epicurus’ *Principal Doctrines* reads “If you fight all sensations, you will not have anything to make reference to in judging even those of them you say are in error” (*Principal Doctrines* 23); Lucretius expands the point, arguing that not to take the senses as in general telling us the truth is to “violate the principal assurance and shatter all the foundations on which life and survival rely”; for anyone who tries this, “life itself would break down immediately”, and (in a touch reminiscent of Aristotle) we would be unable “to avoid precipices and other things of this kind that are to be fled, and to pursue things that are opposite to these” (4.505-510)³. For their part, the Stoics insist that no human action is possible without *assent*: that is, without accepting as true various impressions with which we are presented.

² That contemporary philosophy no longer maintains this kind of sense of the relevance of ordinary life was argued in Burnyeat (1984). I registered a few doubts about Burnyeat’s picture in Bett (1993). But the general point, that philosophy today has much less direct connection with ordinary life than it was assumed to have in antiquity, seems hard to deny; see Cooper (2012), chapter 1.

³ Lucretius’ argument in this passage is in fact that *all* sensations need to be taken as true. But this Epicurean thesis applies only to the atomic “images” that immediately impinge on one’s senses, and the Epicureans allow that doubt is sometimes appropriate concerning what these images are telling us about the objects from which they emanate. On Epicurean epistemology as less radical than it sounds, see Schwab & Shogry (forthcoming).

These could include, again, impressions such as that there is a precipice in front of one; they also include more directly action-guiding impressions such as that stepping back from this precipice is appropriate. According to Plutarch, the necessity of assent for action was the topic on which both Chrysippus and Antipater – Stoics roughly a century apart – had “the most argument” with the skeptics of the Academy (*On Stoic Self-Contradictions* 1057A). In his dialogue *Academica*, Cicero also has Lucullus, who argues against the Academic skeptics, make a point very similar to the Epicureans: namely, that people who do not take some things as certain “snatch away the very instruments or equipment of life, or rather, turn the whole of life upside down from the foundations” (*Acad.* 2.31). Lucullus is a follower of Antiochus of Ascalon, who in the last years of the Academy broke away from its skeptical orthodoxy and developed a philosophy that he claimed to be truer to Plato, the Academy’s founder, but that in epistemology was indistinguishable from Stoicism (*Acad.* 2.67, 137, 143, cf. Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.235)⁴.

To be taken seriously, then, a philosophy must be practically viable; and to be practically viable, it must be willing to accept a great many everyday things as true. These were both widely accepted assumptions in Greek thought. But support for the second assumption was not universal. Aristotle sees a challenge to it from the people he regards as denying the Law of Non-Contradiction; and it is definitely challenged by various thinkers of a skeptical cast of mind – hence the Epicurean and Stoic objections. How Aristotle’s targets might have responded to his charges, we cannot say⁵. But we can say something about how the ancient Greek skeptics

⁴ On Antiochus’ epistemology see Brittain (2012).

⁵ Those he names were all dead before his time; he may also have in mind contemporaries, but he does not name them.

responded to charges such as those of the Epicureans and Stoics. And that takes us to the main subject of this chapter: the ancient Greek skeptics' practice and its relation to truth.

But first, one more thing about the non-skeptical philosophers on whom I have focused so far. The truths they accept of course extend far beyond everyday contexts such as taking care around precipices. They also accept as true, and claim to have established, elaborate edifices of theory about the nature of the world and the place of human beings in it. Everyday truths may be essential for living – or so they insist – but it is the theory that constitutes the philosophies themselves, and that is not only capable of being incorporated into a human life, but, if taken on board, makes one's life the best a human life can be. The connection between the philosophy and the optimal life is rather more obvious and direct in the Epicureans and Stoics than in Aristotle; but Aristotle too takes the philosopher's life to be the best human life, and his own philosophy to be the best available so far. In considering the ancient Greek skeptics, both their attitude to theory and their attitude to everyday life will deserve our attention.

The Epicurean and Stoic anti-skeptical attacks I have alluded to are versions of what is usually known as the *apraxia* or "inactivity" argument – the argument that skepticism is impossible to put into practice and therefore to be dismissed⁶. One thing that is immediately clear is that the skeptics accept the need to respond to this objection. That is, they accept the practical constraint with which I began: any philosophy worthy of serious consideration must be capable of being incorporated into a life. But, as just noted, they do not accept what the Epicureans and Stoics view as its corollary: namely, the second assumption I identified just now,

⁶ For discussion of various versions of this, see Vogt (2010).

that human life is not possible unless one takes certain things to be true. There is more than one way to challenge this, however, as we shall see.

Greek philosophy has two distinct skeptical traditions. I have already referred to the Academic tradition, which began in the Academy with Arcesilaus (316/5-c.241 BCE, head of the school from c.268) and lasted until the early first century BCE; besides Arcesilaus, its most important figure was Carneades (214/2-129/8 BCE, head of the school from before 155 to 137/6). There is also the Pyrrhonian tradition, which drew inspiration from Pyrrho of Elis (c.360-c.270 BCE) but was not formalized until Aenesidemus (early-mid 1st century BCE)⁷. We have extensive surviving writings from a later member of the Pyrrhonian tradition, Sextus Empiricus (probably active around 200 CE). On the Academic side, neither Arcesilaus nor Carneades wrote anything, but we have considerable evidence of their ideas and methods, especially Carneades'; the most important sources are Cicero, who studied in the Academy in its waning years, and Sextus. In what follows I deal with the two traditions separately, beginning with the Pyrrhonians; for reasons of space, and given the state of the evidence, I limit myself to Sextus Empiricus on the Pyrrhonian side and to Carneades on the Academic side. The central questions are, what is the nature of their philosophical practice, and how, if at all, does the notion of truth figure within that practice?

II

Skepticism as Sextus describes it is very different from the philosophies of those such as Aristotle, the Epicureans or the Stoics. It is not a theory, or a doctrine, or a set of arguments for

⁷ The Academics do not actually call themselves skeptics, but they have enough in common with those who did – the Pyrrhonians – to justify placing them in the same category, as was recognized since antiquity.

some conclusion; put most generally, it is not a set of propositions that the skeptic holds to be true. Instead, skepticism itself is a practice or an activity. More precisely, Sextus tells us that skepticism is an *ability (dunamis)* to perform a certain activity. Specifically, it is an ability “to produce oppositions among things that appear and things that are thought in any way whatsoever, 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)⁸. As he goes on to say (1.9), by “things that appear”, in this context, he means things perceived by the senses – though, as we shall see, “appear” is not always understood so narrowly. The things that are to be placed in “opposition”, then, are sense-impressions and ideas (“things that are thought”). On any given topic, there are competing impressions and ideas, and the skeptic’s distinctive method has the effect of putting these into a condition of “equal strength” (*isostheneia*). That is, the skeptic brings it about that one is no more inclined to accept any one of these views of the topic than any other. If so, one will not accept any of them. Instead, one will suspend judgement about the matter – which in turn, it is claimed, results in tranquility.

We can leave aside the point about tranquility. The move from the perception of “equal strength” among the various alternatives to suspension of judgment is clear enough; if the considerations in favor of each alternative really are equally balanced, one has no motivation to settle for any one of them, which makes suspension of judgment the natural outcome. What

⁸ *PH* (the acronym of the Greek title) is the standard abbreviation for Sextus’ best-known work, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. I refer to it in the main text as *Outlines*. All Sextus’ other surviving writings are conventionally referred to by the title *Adversus Mathematicos* (usually translated *Against the Professors*), abbreviated as *M*. In what follows I mainly limit myself to *PH*; but occasionally I mention *Against the Logicians*, which is books 7 and 8 of *M*, and cite passages from other books of *M*.

needs more discussion is what this situation of “equal strength” amounts to and how it is produced.

In considering this, I used to refer to a choice between “psychological” and “rational” interpretations of “equal strength”, opting for the first of these⁹. But I am now persuaded that this terminology was misleading. To be sure, Sextus’ skeptic does not subscribe to norms of rationality that would settle whether or not he *ought*, as a matter of rational necessity, to suspend judgment; as Sextus makes clear in the logical portions of his work (*Outlines* book 2 and *Against the Logicians*), norms of rationality are themselves a subject on which the skeptic suspends judgement, just like all other theoretical matters. Instead, he simply finds himself equally drawn to (or repelled by) each alternative; that is what recognition of their “equal strength” amounts to. But this does not mean (as the labels “psychological” versus “rational” seem to imply) that the skeptic’s reasoning abilities play no role in producing this state of affairs. The alternative views on the question at issue will very often be supported by arguments; the skeptic will need to assess the merits of these arguments, consider objections to them, be on the lookout for unconsidered possibilities, and so on. In doing so, the skeptic will be as much a *reasoner* as those who first devised the arguments. Aside from his general account of skepticism in the first book of *Outlines*, all of Sextus’ surviving work is devoted to examining the main topics in philosophy and other theoretical disciplines; his appetite for active reasoning is almost indefatigable.

⁹ This appears in several of the essays in Bett (2019); see, e.g., 110, 152, 221, 230. Williams (2020) and Smith (2020) both question this distinction, and I concede their point in Bett (2020).

It is this active reasoning that is captured by the term *skeptikos* itself, which means “inquirer”. It is also what is captured by the first few sentences of *Outlines*, where we are told that the skeptic is someone who *keeps on investigating*. Unlike either the person who thinks they have discovered the truth or the person who has decided that the truth is undiscoverable, the skeptic continues to be open to all the evidence, and to check out the full range of views available, on whatever topics may present themselves (*PH* 1.1-3). Scholars have often been dismissive of Sextus’ claim to be an inquirer¹⁰. But it is the very first thing he says about skepticism in *Outlines*. And he later mounts a vigorous defense of the skeptic’s ability to investigate – which he understands in a robust sense, as a rigorous examination of the views advanced on a given subject – in the prelude to his treatments of the three main divisions of philosophy (logic, physics, and ethics) in the rest of the work, which are instances of precisely such investigation (*PH* 2.1-12).

It remains the case, however, that skepticism as Sextus describes it is an unusual *kind of* inquiry or investigation, in that it is not aimed at discovering the truth. Sextus does not rule out that the truth might some day be discovered; as I said, the view that the truth *cannot* be discovered is one from which he dissociates himself right at the start (and ascribes to the Academics (*PH* 1.3) – we shall return to this point). His inquiry is also not oblivious to considerations concerning truth; after all, in lining up the “oppositions” on some subject, he is drawing attention to the variety of credible views that are (or could be) held on that subject, and hence cautioning against settling too quickly on one of these views as the true one¹¹.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Palmer (2000); Striker (2001); Grgic (2006); Marchand (2010). I used to agree; see, e.g., Bett (2019), chapter 1 (originally published 2013).

¹¹ This is well discussed in Castagnoli (2018).

Nevertheless, we usually think of investigation as directed towards discovery, and that is simply not what Sextus is up to. As we saw, the skeptic's "ability" is an ability *to produce a situation of "equal strength"* among the alternatives, not to choose among these alternatives. And Sextus reinforces this when, a little later, he says that the skeptic engages in physics (and also logic and ethics) not "with a view to making declarations with strong confidence about any of the things on which doctrines are held", but "with a view to being able to oppose to every argument an equal argument, and to achieve tranquility" (*PH* 1.18). Sextus frequently accuses his non-skeptical opponents of being rash – that is, of jumping to conclusions too easily – and that is the point of the words "with strong confidence" (*meta bebaiou peismatos*). But as regards the contrast with his own attitude, he need not have included these words; even a tentative adoption of views is not on his agenda. Coming down on any side as being true, strongly or weakly, is precisely what he aims to avoid¹².

Not that this was always so; for the skeptic was not always a skeptic. Sextus describes what he calls "the starting point that causes skepticism" (*archên tês skeptikês aitiôdê*, *PH* 1.12) as follows. Some people, referred to as "highly gifted" (*megalophueis*), are bothered by what he calls the "inconsistency" (*anômalian*) in things; presumably he is talking about the conflicting ways things come across to different people, or to the same people at different times and in different circumstances. These "highly gifted" people proceed to "investigate what is true in things and what is false, on the assumption that by determining these things they would achieve tranquility". The goal, from the start, is tranquility. But the initial plan is to reach this

¹² That Sextus' investigation is, on the contrary, directed (at least in part) towards discovery of the truth is argued by Perin (2010); Vogt (2012), chapter 5; Machuca (2021); Smith (2022). This is the main point on which I still take issue with these scholars, despite taking skeptical investigation more seriously than before (cf. n.10).

state by getting beyond the inconsistency and discovering the truth. Who these “highly gifted” people are, Sextus does not say¹³. But he does tell us a little more about how this initial plan gets sidetracked and replaced by skepticism. The decision to investigate brings these people to philosophy; but it turns out that philosophy is beset with dispute, with multiple positions that seem to be of “equal strength”. Faced with this situation, they suspend judgement. And it then turns out that this suspension of judgment results in just the tranquility they were hoping for, albeit *not* (as they had expected) by way of discovery of the truth (*PH* 1.26, 28-9).

These last two stages are familiar from Sextus’ thumbnail sketch of the skeptical “ability”. But the first of the two, suspension of judgment, is not what these people were initially aiming for, while the second, though it was what they were aiming for, occurs unexpectedly, given the deviation from the original plan. What Sextus might have added is some account of how the initially unplanned (perhaps initially even unwelcome) episodes of suspension of judgment and their unexpected sequel, tranquility, are transformed into the new project of full-fledged skepticism: namely, the regular and intentional production of suspension of judgment (and thereby tranquility) by means of assembling opposing ideas and impressions of “equal strength”. Still, it is not hard to imagine how the story might be filled out: once tranquility via suspension of judgment has been experienced enough times as a happy accident, the original project of discovering the truth might be dropped and the new project of generating suspension of judgment put in its place. To be a truly full-scale skeptic, one would have to have conducted this process comprehensively; and Sextus does say on occasion that

¹³ For discussion of this, see Smith (2022), chapter 2 – and on the whole process I sketch here, chapters 2-4.

tranquility follows suspension of judgment about *everything* (PH 1.31, 205)¹⁴. But the characteristic skeptical “ability” might easily swing into action well before that.

What range of topics does the skeptical procedure apply to? Talk of “everything” is unhelpful without further specification; but it is clear from his consistent language on the subject that “everything” here means “everything concerning the *real nature* of things”. Having mentioned “the starting point that causes skepticism”, Sextus refers to “the starting point (*archê*) of the skeptical setup (*sustaseôs*)” (PH 1.12 – *archê* here might also be rendered “principle”): that is, the centerpiece of skepticism as a developed scheme of thought. And this, he says, is “every argument’s having an equal argument lying in opposition to it” – precisely the state of affairs generated by successful exercise of the skeptical “ability”. Now, later in the book, “For every argument there’s an equal argument lying in opposition” is identified as one of several standard skeptical catchphrases; in explaining it, he says that it applies not just to any argument, but to arguments “constructing something dogmatically” – that is, attempting to establish something about matters that are “unclear” (PH 1.202-204). Similar limitations are placed on several other phrases expressing the skeptical attitude (PH 1.1903, 197, 198, 200). Summing up the section on the skeptical phrases, he says that they apply to “the unclear things that are subjects of dogmatic investigation”, and that the skeptical attitude is a refusal to “make any firm declarations about the nature of the actual objects out there” (PH 1.208). This withdrawal from speaking about the “nature” (*phusis*) of things, about the “actual objects out there” (*tôn ektos hupokeimenôn*), or both, is frequently mentioned in actual cases of

¹⁴ This point is emphasized in Smith (2022), chapter 4.4.

suspension of judgment, including when Sextus describes the standard forms of skeptical argument known as the Modes (e.g., *PH* 1.123, 128, 134).

“Dogmatists” is Sextus’ word for those who think they have discovered the truth; and it is now clear that the kind of truth at issue here is truth about the underlying nature of the objects being investigated. In confirmation of this point, when he explains what it means to say that a skeptic holds no “doctrine” (*dogma*), he says that the skeptic never gives “assent to some unclear matter investigated by the sciences” (*PH* 1.13). “Unclear” things are things that are not matters of plain experience, which therefore need further inquiry; and Sextus’ method is to ensure that one is never in a position to say anything reliable about them, because there are always opposing arguments of “equal strength” to be assembled concerning them. The subjects on which he focuses serious attention, then, are theoretical disciplines, so it is no surprise that, as I said, nearly all his surviving work is devoted to such subjects. But it is not only theoreticians who might have views about the real nature of things, beyond simply how they strike us. Sextus says that “ordinary people” (*idiôtai*, *PH* 1.30) think that certain things are *by nature* good and others by nature bad. Elsewhere he cites the existence of god, and the existence of motion, as everyday assumptions (*PH* 3.65, 218-19, *M* 9.50, 10.45); since they are introduced alongside the corresponding views of dogmatists, he must be understanding these too as assumptions about how things are by nature, and on them too he suspends judgment. Another homely example he offers is honey (*PH* 1.20). Honey tastes sweet (most of the time); but is it *really* sweet – is there an argument that could establish the sweetness as inherent to honey, rather than just an effect it happens to have on us? To get into this question seriously, one would have to start a scientific investigation as the dogmatists do. But it is a question that might occur to any of us.

Primarily, however, we can think of the skeptical procedure as directed towards the theories found in philosophy and other technical disciplines, and as constituting in some sense a rival to them. Whether skepticism itself is a philosophy is a question on which Sextus seems somewhat ambivalent¹⁵. The reason is presumably that he fears people may understand the term “philosophy” as referring to the kind of philosophy practiced by the dogmatists. In any case, it is the kind of truths that these theoretical disciplines purport to establish that Sextus’ skeptical practice resolutely eschews.

Now this raises the question, what is the flip side? Is there another kind of truth that Sextus is open to accepting? This takes us back to the *apraxia* argument mounted by numerous non-skeptical schools. According to them, accepting many truths is essential to living a human life. But Sextus will respond that it is not necessary to accept as true any pronouncements concerning the real nature of things. He is happy to discuss such matters for as long as any dogmatist likes; but as a skeptic, he will always end up suspending judgment about them. What he will not suspend judgment about is the way things *appear*, and this is enough to make a human life perfectly possible. Addressing the *apraxia* objection, he agrees that we need some form of criterion or standard for deciding what to do. But he distinguishes between a criterion of truth, which is designed to make judgments about “reality or unreality” – that is, the kind of thing the dogmatists claim to know about – and a criterion of action, which allows us to conduct our ordinary lives (*PH* 1.21). Sextus takes up the first kind of criterion when he discusses dogmatic theories in the area of logic and, true to form, suspends judgment about its

¹⁵ I have discussed this in Bett (2019), chapter 2, especially section IV.

existence (*PH* 2.14-79, *M* 7.25-445).¹⁶ But he has no hesitation in adopting a criterion of the second kind: the skeptic's criterion of action is simply "what is apparent" (*PH* 1.22). For example, with rare exceptions honey tastes sweet. Never mind what it is like in its real nature; its sweet taste is enough for us to decide to spread it on our bread, stir it into our tea, etc. There are obviously a multitude of such ways in which things strike us, and which shape how we go about our everyday activities.

Sextus states this in general terms as follows: "Paying attention to the things that appear, we live without opinions according to the routine of life" (*PH* 1.23) – where "without opinions" means "without committing ourselves about how things really are". He goes on to list four main categories of these "things that appear" (*PH* 1.23-4). The first is "guidance by nature", which he glosses by saying that "we are naturally perceivers and thinkers". This is not to suggest any theory of human nature; it is simply to say that, as the natural organisms we are, we have certain perceiving and thinking capacities, which shape the way the world looks and seems to us. (The thinking capacities include those that the skeptics employ in conducting their investigations; the split between the theoretical and the everyday is not absolute.) Secondly, we cannot help being affected by such things as hunger and thirst; these unavoidable experiences also shape what we find worth doing and pursuing. Thirdly, laws and customs shape how things appear to us and therefore how we act. And finally, there is the teaching of skills – such as medicine, in which Sextus himself was trained – which also refine our

¹⁶ Introducing the criterion of truth, Sextus says that tools such as rulers, and also the natural operation of the senses, are sometimes spoken of as criteria (*PH* 2.15, *M* 7.31-2). But this appears to be a dogmatic classification of criteria – in both places it is how criteria "are spoken of" (*legetai*) – and he never himself speaks of these as criteria of truth. The criteria of truth he suspends judgement about are not these everyday resources (which he would obviously use to navigate the world as it appears to him), but specifically dogmatic criteria aimed at uncovering what is really the case.

sensibilities in certain areas and affect our behavior. All this is assumed to happen at the level of how things strike us, with no commitment to things *really* being any particular way. This is not to deny that we might sometimes change our minds. A carpenter on a certain project might initially be inclined to use one kind of tool. But a closer look at the task, and maybe discussion with fellow carpenters, might lead to a different tool looking the better choice, and to the job being done successfully with that second tool. Though we might express this by saying “It first appeared that tool A was the best one to use, but it turned out to be tool B”, Sextus would not think of this as going outside the realm of appearances. The whole process still occurs on the level of how things strike us in everyday terms; this is understood as contrasted with the real nature of things, which is what theorists claim to understand (and ordinary people occasionally express views about).

This brings us back to the issue of the skeptic’s attitude to truth. As Sextus goes about his daily activities, might he not accept certain things as true – and thus, on one level, satisfy those who posed the *apraxia* argument, even while suspending judgment on the real nature of things? At this point, it depends on what we think truth amounts to. If truth is understood in terms of some deflationary theory, according to which “It is true that snow is white” says no more than “Snow is white”, then to say that the skeptic accepts truths looks unproblematic. In their everyday routines, skeptics might hear things such as “That’s a very big pile of garbage”, “That was a really good meal”, or “You need a Phillips screwdriver for that job”; in response they might quite cheerfully say “That’s true” (or perhaps, “I’m not sure if that’s true”). On this conception of truth, provided one can talk at all, one can talk of truth, and this applies to skeptics in their everyday lives as much as to anyone else.

But if we might thus be comfortable with the idea of Sextus speaking of truths in the context of everyday life, I have the strong impression that – with one qualification – Sextus himself would *not* want to do so. And this is because he seems to have a much more robust conception of truth than the deflationary one¹⁷. As we saw, he refers to the criterion of truth as what (according to those who believe in such a thing) allows us to determine “reality and unreality” (*huparxis, anuparxia*, PH 1.21, 2.14). It is the dogmatists who, he says, claim to have discovered the truth (PH 1.2); and the “highly gifted” people who start their investigations with the aim of distinguishing what is true and what is false (PH 1.12, 26) seem to be aspiring dogmatists. He also says that even the skeptical phrases express how things *appear* to the skeptic; he does not wish to insist on their truth (PH 1.191, 206); as Sextus uses the word “insist” (*diabebaiousthai*), it always indicates laying down the law in a dogmatic spirit, with confidence that one has captured how things really are. Finally, consider his gloss on Democritus’ famous saying that, by contrast with many perceived properties of things that hold only “by convention” (*nomoi*), it is atoms and void which exist “in reality”. Democritus’ word “in reality” (*eteêi*) is archaic by Sextus’ time, and he explains to his readers that by “in reality”, Democritus means “in truth” (*alêtheiai*, PH 1.214). I have picked just a few instances from the first book of *Outlines*, but the pattern is clear: when Sextus speaks of truth, he has in mind correspondence to an objective reality. What is true is what is *really the case* – which is precisely what, as a skeptic, he is not prepared to make any commitments about.

¹⁷ The qualification is that Sextus emphasizes that the skeptics are not sticklers for precise language (PH 1.207). Hence, whatever his own conception of truth, he might not worry about occasionally saying “that’s true” in ordinary conversation; unless he is talking with philosophers, no one will make anything of this.

This is not to say that the word “true” (*alêthês*) is only applied in Sextus to theories about the nature of things. In his treatments of logic, he frequently refers to commonsense propositions, such as “it is day” or “every human is an animal”, as true. But this is in the context of the dogmatists’ logical theory; he is not personally endorsing the truth of these propositions. As for how truth is conceived here, he refers to logic (following the Stoics) as “the science [*epistêmê*] of what is true and false and neither” (*PH* 2.95, cf. 229, 247)¹⁸, and this includes the topics of sign and demonstration. Since these are methods for making inferences about the “unclear” matters dogmatic theories claim to describe, it seems clear that in these contexts, too, Sextus continues to treat truth as correspondence to reality – and to view the dogmatists as doing the same. To call a statement true is to say that what it asserts is really the case; the topic need not be in any usual sense theoretical, but the commitment is to something’s actually being so, independently of the appearances. Hence we can assume he would not be prepared to claim even “it is day” or “every human is an animal” to be *true*. While he might have no hesitation in *saying* these things – they fit his experience just fine – to call these propositions true, from his perspective, would be a step too far; it would be to venture opinions about what, as we saw, he calls “the actual objects out there”, and that is the dogmatists’ province, even if we are dealing with quotidian, rather than theoretical, matters¹⁹. If I am right, his response to the *apraxia* objection would be “No, we need not accept anything as true, either in theory or in

¹⁸ For the Stoic parallel, see Diogenes Laertius, 7.41. Strictly speaking, this definition applies not to all of logic, but to dialectic, and Sextus follows this terminology. The other part of logic, according to the Stoics, is rhetoric, which Sextus treats not as part of philosophy, but as one of the special disciplines (discussed in *M* 2).

¹⁹ How the skeptic uses language, and whether it is actually feasible, is discussed in detail in Corti (2009).

everyday matters, in order to live a human life”²⁰. This may strike us as odd; but that may be because talk of truth is not, for us, invested with such significance.²¹

III

Carneades’ skeptical practice has much in common with that of Sextus. Cicero says that the Academics’ standard method was to argue “on either side” of a question (*in utramque partem*, *Acad.* 2.7). He traces this back to Plato himself, but also associates it with both Arcesilaus and Carneades (*Acad.* 1.46). By contrast, Diogenes Laertius (4.28) says that Arcesilaus was the first to argue in this way; the implication, however, is clearly that his successors in the Academy, which must include Carneades, did so as well. Besides arguing on both sides himself, Carneades often argued against the views of non-skeptical philosophers; we find evidence of this on the subject of the criterion of truth (Sextus, *M* 7.402-11), freedom and determinism (or indeterminism) (Cicero, *On Fate* 20-33), and the existence of the gods (Sextus, *M* 9.140, 182-90). We also hear that he assembled a sixfold classification of actual or possible views on the ethical end (Cicero, *On Ends* 5.16-20); he is said to have defended one of these for dialectical purposes, and the purpose of the whole taxonomy seems to be to cast doubt on the Stoic view

²⁰ Did those who launched the *aproxia* objection understand truth in the same way as Sextus himself does (and as he seems to assume they do)? This is much too large a question to examine here; I will simply say that I suspect the answer is yes. A robust conception of truth as correspondence to reality seems to be standard in Greek philosophy; the matter is rarely discussed, but see Hankinson (2003), 78 and, on Aristotle, Crivelli (2004), chapter 4.

²¹ One further complication: Myles Burnyeat held that “true” (*alêthês*) in Greek thought is always *about* an objective world, so that claims about the nature of our experience could not be called true or false (Burnyeat [1982], 26-8; Burnyeat [1983a], 121). He was wrong about that, as shown by Bailey (2002), 157-165; Corti (2009), 143-147; the Cyrenaics held that how we are affected by things (though not the nature of things themselves) can be known, and, as Sextus reports it, this includes calling statements about how we are affected “true” (*M* 7.193, 194). Would Sextus himself go along with this usage? He does say that how things appear to us is not up for debate (*PH* 1.22). But to call such statements *true* would be to say that it really is the case that we are thus affected; since Sextus is prepared to question the senses’ or the intellect’s ability or know themselves or one another (*M* 7.301-313), I very much doubt he would want to make this commitment. The Cyrenaics have a philosophical theory in which this has a point; Sextus does not (see Bett [2018], 20). In any case, however, the everyday claims considered in the last few paragraphs are about things in the world (as they appear to us), not about our experience itself.

of this matter. Carneades, then, like Sextus, comes across as an active and nimble reasoner. And we can be confident that, again like Sextus, the aim of this activity was not to establish any view as definitively true. While we do not hear explicitly of Carneades as suspending judgment, we are told of something that amounts to the same thing: namely, that Carneades eliminated *assent* – that is, taking things as true – which, as we saw, the Stoics insisted was a necessary condition of action. According to Cicero, this was described by his successor Clitomachus as a Herculean feat, assent itself being characterized as a “wild and savage monster” (*Acad.* 2.108).

Much more could be said about Carneades’ argumentative activities. But for the remainder of this chapter I would like to concentrate on some ways in which Carneades’ skeptical approach differs from that of Sextus. For despite his reported opposition to assent, in at least one case Carneades seems willing to state a conclusion in his own person²². As we saw, Sextus attributes to the Academics (including Carneades) the view that nothing can be known (*PH* 1.3, 226). And this seems to be supported by Cicero, who reports that Carneades asserted that nothing could be apprehended (*percipi*, *Acad.* 2.28) – that is, grasped with certainty. The Stoic Antipater is said to have objected that if the Academics are going to make such an assertion, they should at least take themselves to apprehend the assertion itself. But Carneades is said to have responded that, on the contrary, this would be plainly self-refuting: if *nothing* can be apprehended, that includes the claim itself – it is self-applicable. It is striking, however, that he does not deny *making* the claim. It appears, then, that Sextus is right to distinguish

²² Many scholars have held that Carneades only ever reacted to the views of others and never put forward views of his own. An important stimulus to this view was Couissin (1929), translated into English in the widely read Burnyeat (1983), as well as Sedley (1983) in the same volume. I have argued against it in more detail in Bett (forthcoming), especially sections III and V; here I limit myself to the essential points.

himself from Carneades; the latter does espouse the view that nothing can be apprehended, whereas Sextus keeps this question open. What other views he may have espoused is hard to say. But Cicero tells us that Clitomachus said he could never get clear on what Carneades' own views were (*Acad.* 2.139), which implies that there were some; if he had completely avoided all theoretical views, like Sextus, Clitomachus would have known the answer – it would have been “none”. No doubt his practice of arguing on either side made it difficult to tell, in any given case, whether Carneades was arguing for a certain position for purely dialectical purposes or because he found it plausible. But it does look as if arguing on either side was not the limit of his philosophical activity; sometimes, though he did not claim to *apprehend* how things are, he did in some sense opt for one side or the other.

The question, of course, is how to reconcile this with his reported opposition to assent. We can begin to address this by noting that Carneades was also famous for an account of how one can make decisions by means of “persuasive appearances” (*pithanai phantasiai*) without committing oneself to their truth – which is clearly another response to the *apraxia* objection. Sextus discusses Carneades' treatment of this topic at some length in his *Against the Logicians*, and Cicero alludes to it on numerous occasions.

As Sextus describes it, a persuasive appearance is one that strikes the person having it as true. It is one thing for an appearance to be true or false objectively speaking; it is another thing for an appearance to *feel as if* it is true or false. Persuasive appearances are those that feel relatively strongly as if they are true, and there can naturally be degrees of persuasiveness. Persuasiveness is not the same as truth, and can never guarantee truth. But persuasive appearances usually lead us in the right direction, and no method of decision is perfect (*M*

7.168-75). One can also take active steps to increase the persuasiveness of the appearances, by seeing whether they are consistent with other appearances on the same subject, or by checking whether there are factors that might lead us to doubt their truth; here too one might pursue these measures to differing degrees, depending on the importance of the matter at hand (*M* 7.176-89). Even after all this, a persuasive appearance might turn out to be mistaken – that is, might turn out to be contradicted by another, more persuasive body of appearances. But there are ways to affect the persuasiveness of the appearances so that they come across to us as true to the greatest extent possible. And this allows us a way of deciding what to do without ever having to *commit* ourselves to the truth of these appearances; one can feel very strongly as if something is true, and act on that basis, without making any definitive judgment on its truth. In addition, although Sextus does not dwell on this, it allows us a way of expressing a preference for certain philosophical views over others; one can prefer the views one finds persuasive without settling on them as definitely true.

This may still seem more like a rhetorical sleight of hand than a genuine resolution of the puzzle. To *act* on a persuasive appearance, one might say, is surely to treat it as true. Equally, in the theoretical realm, to *assert* that nothing can be apprehended, as Carneades is reported to have done, is surely to treat that as true. As we saw, the Stoics insisted that action requires assent – that is, taking certain things as true. They may well seem to have a point.

But here another element in Carneades' picture deserves attention. An important passage of Cicero's *Academica* (*Acad.* 2.104), which again reports Clitomachus explaining Carneades²³, distinguishes between full-scale assent, where one definitely commits oneself to

²³ Note "in almost these words" (*his fere verbis*, *Acad.* 2.102); Cicero is clearly trying to be as accurate as possible.

the truth of an appearance, and a less robust attitude, which one might also call assent, but which Cicero usually refers to as “approving” or “following” an appearance. This weaker attitude to one’s appearances is sufficient for one to act on them; it is also sufficient to guide one in discussion (whether philosophical or otherwise) – the passage specifically refers not just to acting, but to answering questions. And the appearances one thus “approves” or “follows”, Cicero says, are those that “are not impeded by anything”, which is clearly a reference to those persuasive appearances that have been checked for consistency with others, as described in Sextus’ account of Carneades; Sextus’ word for those that meet this standard is “unimpeded” (*aperispastos*, *M* 7.176). The point, then, is that persuasive appearances can be acted on, or used as a basis for choices among philosophical views, without requiring definite commitment to their truth. And so, if “assent” is understood as the full-scale assent described in this passage, it is after all possible to *hold* views without assenting to them. In particular, the view that nothing can be apprehended is one that Carneades can hold. As we saw, he does not claim to apprehend it; and as we can now say, he does not even assent to it in the full-scale fashion. But he finds it persuasive and therefore approves it.

Sextus ignores (or perhaps, is simply unaware of) this distinction Carneades drew between assent and approval, and thus exaggerates the difference between Carneades and himself. But he is not wrong that there is a difference, and it revolves precisely around their attitudes to truth. Unlike Sextus, Carneades does have an orientation towards truth. An appearance one finds persuasive is an appearance that one sees as (to some significant degree) likely to be true. Speaking as a card-carrying Academic, Cicero says that the purpose of the Academics’ philosophical activity is to get as close to the truth as possible, and that the only

difference between them and their dogmatic opponents is that, while the latter “do not doubt that what they defend is true, we hold many things as persuasive, which we can easily follow, but scarcely maintain with certainty” (*Acad.* 2.7-8). He does not specifically mention Carneades in this context, but to judge from what we have seen, this fits Carneades’ attitude very nicely. There is an inherent connection between persuasiveness and truth, and Sextus’ account of Carneades’ persuasive impression is quite explicit about this²⁴. But there is a difference between saying that something is true and saying that it is likely to be true. To call an impression likely is to refer to one’s own judgment or belief, and hence to speak in a way that is at least in part subjective; one never goes further than saying that something *strikes one* as true (though it may do so very forcefully). But the judgment is nevertheless *about* something objective, namely the truth of the impression. Carneades’ philosophical practice, or at least some part of it, is truth-directed in a way that Sextus’ is not; his everyday practice also involves holding views that strike him as true. He stops short of *committing* himself to their truth (the Stoic requirement); but he nonetheless takes a genuine interest in their truth, as Sextus does not.

As I said, what views Carneades held, in this non-committal fashion, besides the view that nothing can be apprehended, is somewhat speculative. But the matters we have just been discussing – his account of persuasive appearances and his distinction between assent and approval – would seem to belong on the list; they too would be self-applicable – he would find them persuasive and approve them, rather than assenting to them in the full-scale fashion. If this entire framework is sound – which would of course take much more discussion to

²⁴ This is well emphasized in Thorsrud (2018) (against, among others, Bett [1990]).

determine than I have been able to give it here – there is simply no reason for him not to adopt them as his own views.

References

- Bailey, Alan. 2002. *Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonian Scepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bett, Richard. 1990. "Carneades' Distinction between Assent and Approval." *The Monist* 73: 3-20.
- Bett, Richard. 1993. "Scepticism and Everyday Attitudes in Ancient and Modern Philosophy." *Metaphilosophy* 24 (4): 363-381.
- Bett, Richard. 2018. "The Cyrenaics and Skepticism". In *Skepticism: From Antiquity to the Present*, edited by Diego E. Machuca and Baron Reed, 14-23. London: Bloomsbury.
- Bett, Richard. 2019. *How to be a Pyrrhonist: The Practice and Significance of Pyrrhonian Skepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bett, Richard. 2020. "Reply to my Commentators, Part 2." *Sképsis: Revista de Filosofia* 21: 210-215. <https://philosophicalskepticism.org>.
- Bett, Richard. Forthcoming. "The Stoics and Carneades: Dialectic and the Holding of Views." In *The Oxford Handbook of Hellenistic Philosophy*, edited by Nathan Powers and Jacob Klein.
- Brittain, Charles. 2012. "Antiochus' Epistemology." In *The Philosophy of Antiochus*, edited by David Sedley, 104-130. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burnyeat, M.F. 1982. "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed." *Philosophical Review* XCI (1): 3-40.

- Burnyeat, M.F. 1983a. "Can the Skeptic Live his Skepticism?" In *The Skeptical Tradition*, edited by Myles Burnyeat, 117-148. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burnyeat, Myles. 1983b. *The Skeptical Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burnyeat, M.F. 1984. "The Sceptic in his Place and Time." In *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*, edited by Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind and Quentin Skinner, 225-254. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Castagnoli, Luca. 2018. "Aporia and Enquiry in Ancient Pyrrhonism." In *The Aporetic Tradition in Ancient Philosophy*, edited by George Karamanolis and Vasilis Politis, 205-227. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cooper, John M. 2012. *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Corti, Lorenzo. 2009. *Scepticisme et langage*. Paris: Vrin.
- Couissin, Pierre. 1929. "Le stoicism de la nouvelle Académie." *Revue d'histoire de la philosophie* 3: 241-276. Translated into English ("The Stoicism of the New Academy") in *The Skeptical Tradition*, edited by Myles Burnyeat, 31-63. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Crivelli, Paolo. 2004. *Aristotle on Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grgic, Filip. 2006. "Sextus Empiricus on the Goal of Skepticism." *Ancient Philosophy* 26: 141-60.
- Hadot, Pierre. 1995. *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Edited with an introduction by Arnold I. Davidson; translated by Michael Chase. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Hankinson, R.J. 2003. "Stoic Epistemology." In *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, edited by Brad Inwood, 59-84. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Machuca, Diego. 2021. "Can the Skeptic Search for Truth?" *Elenchos* 42 (2): 321-349.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/elen-2021-0017>.
- Marchand, Stéphane. 2010. "Le sceptique cherche-t-il vraiment la vérité?" *Revue de Métaphysique et Morale* No.1: 125-141.
- Palmer, John. 2000. "Skeptical Investigation." *Ancient Philosophy* 20: 351-375.
- Perin, Casey. 2010. *The Demands of Reason: An Essay on Pyrrhonian Scepticism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schwab, Whitney and Simon Shogry. Forthcoming. "Epicureans and Stoics on the Rationality of Perception." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.
- Sedley, David. 1983. "The Motivation of Greek Skepticism." In *The Skeptical Tradition*, edited by Myles Burnyeat, 9-29. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Smith, Plínio Junqueira. 2020. "Bett on the Modes of Suspension: Inconsistency?" *Sképsis: Revista de Filosofia* 21: 174-187. <https://philosophicalskepticism.org>.
- Smith, Plínio Junqueira. 2022. *Sextus Empiricus' Neo-Pyrrhonism: Skepticism as a Rationally Ordered Experience*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.
- Striker, Gisela. 2001. "Scepticism as a Kind of Philosophy." *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 83: 113-129.
- Thorsrud, Harald. 2018. "Carneades." In *Skepticism: From Antiquity to the Present*, edited by Diego E. Machuca and Baron Reed, 51-66. London: Bloomsbury.
- Vogt, Katja Maria. 2010. "Scepticism and Action." In *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, edited by Richard Bett, 165-180. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vogt, Katja Maria. 2012. *Belief and Truth: A Skeptic Reading of Plato*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Williams, Michael. 2020. "Skeptical Arguments and Pyrrhonian Practice: A Response to Richard Bett." *Sképsis: Revista de Filosofia* 21: 160-173. <https://philosophicalskepticism.org>.