

Sextus Empiricus, Philosopher-Doctor: One Vocation or Two?

The Pyrrhonian skeptic Sextus Empiricus was a doctor; that is virtually the only thing we know about him with any certainty. He refers several times to his medical profession (*PH* 2.238, *M* 1.260, *M* 11.47); his title *Empeirikos* marks him as a member of the Empiric school of medicine, and Diogenes Laertius calls him “Sextus the Empiric” (9.116). The pseudo-Galenic *Introduction or Doctor* actually refers to him as a head of the Empiric school (XIV, 683-4 Kühn). In addition, Sextus refers to (now lost) works of his called *Empiric Treatises* (*M* 1.61) and *Medical Treatises* (*M* 7.202) – or perhaps these were alternative titles for, or different parts of, the same work. He was not the only Pyrrhonist with a connection to the Empiric school of medicine,¹ and this is no accident; as we shall see, there is a clear connection between Empiricism and Pyrrhonism in terms of assumptions and methodology. All this makes it natural to ask a number of questions about the relation between Sextus as medical practitioner and Sextus as philosophical skeptic. There is the question whether Sextus himself conceives of his skeptical activities in terms of a medical model – and, more generally, what he has to say about medicine in his surviving works; there is the question whether, or how far, it may be useful for *us* to think of Sextus’ Pyrrhonian skepticism as a form of therapy analogous to the medical kind (whatever Sextus himself thought); and there is the question whether Pyrrhonian skepticism (perhaps in virtue of its historical links with medical Empiricism) has a closer affinity to medicine than do other philosophical schools. In what follows, I will address these questions, after setting the stage in

¹ Diogenes Laertius names Menodotus (active early 2nd century CE) in his list of the Pyrrhonist succession and calls him an Empiricist doctor (9.116); Galen refers to him frequently in his *Outline of Empiricism*. In the same list, Diogenes refers to Sextus’ student Saturninus, who is otherwise unknown, as an Empiricist.

two ways: first, by expanding on the common ground shared by Empiricism and Pyrrhonism, including on Sextus' own conception of this matter, and second, by giving some background on the history of medical analogies in Greek philosophy before Sextus.²

I

The Empiricist doctors proceeded, as the name suggests, by experience (*empeiria*). They used the remedies that had been shown in practice to work; if a certain method for fixing broken bones, or a certain drug administered to those suffering from fever, had been observed to be effective multiple times with multiple patients, those were the procedures to be followed. The "observer" need not only be the individual doctor; remedies that others had found effective could just as well be adopted, and for evidence of what was effective, the views of the patients, not only those of the physicians, could be important. In this way a whole series of routines would accumulate, on which an Empiricist doctor could draw, perhaps refine in light of further experience, and perhaps add to. In the case of diseases or ailments that had not been encountered before, the Empiricists would make use of "transition to the similar" (*metabasis tou homoious*): that is, they would apply remedies, or the nearest equivalents to remedies, that had worked in cases involving a similar body part, or similar symptoms. This, of course, was more hit-or-miss than the consistent use of the same remedies for the same conditions. But when these remedies for the conditions the doctor had not previously experienced did work, that would be at least a starting point for expanding the repertoire of routines – always to be

² In this paper I shall use the terms "Pyrrhonism" and "skepticism" interchangeably. Pyrrhonism is not the only skeptical intellectual tradition in ancient Greek thought, but since the focus of the paper is Sextus, it is the only one relevant for our purposes.

strengthened, of course, by one's own or others' additional experience of those remedies' success in comparable cases.

What the Empiricists did *not* do was offer explanations for *why* the successful remedies were successful. Theories about the underlying nature of the body, which might be expected to deliver such explanations, were simply not their concern. Their medical practice was based on experience and only experience. Other doctors did engage in theorizing of this kind, and these the Empiricists called Rationalists (*logikoi*); Rationalism was not the name of a particular school of medicine, but was a term covering anyone who claimed to understand how the human body worked, and to devise effective remedies on the basis of that understanding. Empiricism versus Rationalism thus marked a fundamental divide in ancient Greek medical practice and methodology.³

The parallel between Empiricism in medicine and Pyrrhonian skepticism is clear enough. The skeptics too avoid all theorizing about the underlying nature of things (either the human body or anything else); that is the province of the people Sextus calls "dogmatists" (people with doctrines: that is, philosophers who claimed to have achieved some level of understanding of the world). Sextus does not rule out that the truth about these things might someday be discovered. But everything he and his fellow skeptics have seen in philosophical discussion so far has led them to suspend judgment about these matters – and even about the question whether the truth about them will ever be found. In fact, Sextus describes skepticism as an *ability* (*dunamis*) to produce suspension of judgment about these matters, by lining up the opposing arguments and impressions on any given topic in such a way that they have what he

³ Eventually there was a third alternative, Methodism, on which more shortly.

calls “equal strength” (*isostheneia*): that is, an equal tendency to make you accept them (*PH* 1.8). If the attractiveness of the opposing positions really is equal, suspending judgment on the topic is the only possible outcome (or so Sextus assumes). The topic might, for example, be in physics, such as whether matter is atomic, or continuous and potentially divisible at any point (both were respectable positions in the ancient world); or it might be in ethics, such as whether anything can be identified as absolutely good or bad, and if so, what. Most of Sextus’ surviving writings are huge compilations of opposing positions, in these areas and others – many of them from non-skeptical philosophers, but many devised by the skeptics themselves – designed to bring about this suspension of judgment. What the skeptic relies on for the decisions of daily life are the ways things *appear*. Whatever may be the real nature of things, they strike us in various ways – generally in repeated and predictable ways – and the ways they appear to us are quite sufficient for practical purposes (*PH* 1.21-4).

There is more to be said about Sextus’ skepticism, but this is enough for now. What Pyrrhonism and Empiricism have in common is, first of all, an avoidance of theory; secondly, and relatedly, the absence of any single overarching *system* of thought; and thirdly, the development of a large body of know-how about what works for the purposes at hand, which itself can be more or less systematic in character and which can be passed on from one practitioner to another. In the Empiricists’ case, the purposes are medical. In the Pyrrhonists’ case, they are, on the one hand, philosophical and, on the other hand, practical and everyday. Sextus regularly employs similar kinds of argumentative techniques to generate his oppositions of “equal strength”, the most obvious being the various Modes, which are ready-made forms of skeptical argumentation. As for everyday life, the Pyrrhonists’ ways of proceeding need be no different

from those of non-philosophers; but Sextus speaks several times of the “routine of life” (*biôtikê têtêsis*, *PH* 1.23, 2.254, 3.235, cf. 2.246), and this is clearly an important part of his total picture of skepticism. It is no surprise that Galen remarks, in his *Outline of Empiricism* (82, 28ff. Deichgräber), that “the empiricist’s attitude towards medical matters is like the sceptic’s attitude towards the whole of life”.⁴

Sextus does not use the term *empeiria* to refer to his own philosophical activity; in fact, the word is relatively rare in his surviving work. But he does at one point contrast everyday *empeiria*, which can identify what is useful, with “dogmatic thought-processes”, which are useless (*PH* 2.258). The topic is how to deal with superficially convincing but logically invalid arguments, or “sophisms”, and the dogmatic views on this topic are said to be vulnerable to skeptical attack, whereas *empeiria* can handle such sophisms just fine. Elsewhere he mentions that in his lost work *Empiric Treatises* he had observed that the word *empeiria* can be used interchangeably with “expertise” (*technê*), contrary to those who would dismiss *empeiria* as “non-expert and non-rational” (*atechnos kai alogos*, *M* 1.61).⁵ The treatment of the topic in the lost work presumably focused on *empeiria* in medical contexts,⁶ but the context in which he refers to this treatment is a purported definition of the discipline of grammar as a form of *empeiria*, which is elucidated by the notion of grammarians as people “of broad knowledge and learning” (*M* 1.63). It seems clear from these passages that Sextus is prepared to think of

⁴ I use the translation of Michael Frede in Frede 1985. This volume also includes Galen’s *On the Sects for Beginners*, which is an introduction to all three main approaches to medicine: Rationalist, Empiricist, and Methodist. (Elsewhere translations are my own.)

⁵ Scorn of *empeiria* as quite distinct from *technê*, because unable to give any account (*logos*) of the nature of the things it deals with, goes back to Plato’s *Gorgias* (463a-465a; the word *tribê*, “knack”, which Sextus attributes to the view he is opposing, occurs at 463b4).

⁶ On *empeiria* in a medical context – the *empeiria* of a midwife, as it happens – see also *M* 5.66.

empeiria as valuable in both medical and non-medical contexts, as intellectually respectable, and, in a philosophical context, as superior to dogmatism. It is worth noting, further, that the word *têrêsis*, used a number of times in Sextus to refer to everyday routines, is also used to refer to observation in medicine, especially in the Empiric school (Galen, *On the Sects for Beginners*, chapter 4, p.7, 1-3 Helmreich).⁷ All this certainly suggests that Sextus is well aware of the parallels between the ways the Empiricist and the Pyrrhonist go about their business, even if he is not as explicit about it as Galen.

But there is a complication. At the end of the first book of his best-known work, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus addresses the question whether medical Empiricism is the same as his brand of skepticism. His answer is hardly the resounding “yes” that one would expect. What he says is that “if in fact that form of Empiricism makes a strong statement about the impossibility of grasping unclear things, it’s not the same as skepticism, nor would it make sense for the skeptic to align himself with that school. It’s more the so-called Method, it seems to me, that he could pursue” (*PH* 1.236). The Methodic school held that all diseases are a matter of excessive constriction or looseness (or a combination of the two) in the body, and that these states, and therefore the appropriate treatment for them, are immediately evident and do not need to be inferred – although it seems as though “evident” did not necessarily mean only “observable by the senses”.⁸ We need not dwell on the specifics of the Method. Sextus’ qualified approval of the Methodists is due to their being guided by what is immediately apparent and not making

⁷ Cf. Galen, *On Hippocrates’ “Regimen in Acute Diseases”* (XV.830 Kühn); *On Hippocrates’ “Epidemics”* (XVIII(B).307 Kühn). For a use of the term outside Empiricism, see Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.4; Soranus was a Methodist.

⁸ On the differences between Empiricism and Methodism and on Sextus’ attitude towards Methodism, see Allen 2010. See also Frede 1987a on Empiricism and Frede 1987b on Methodism.

any claims about what goes beyond this, in addition to their relaxed and nontechnical use of language (*PH* 1.237-241). By contrast, he accuses some Empiricists of holding the definite view that anything beyond the realm of the apparent is impossible for us to know about. As I said, that is a question, like all other questions having to do with the real nature of things, about which the skeptic suspends judgment; the claim that we *cannot* know about this is just as much a violation of skepticism as the claim that we can. (At the very start of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*PH* 1.1-3) he distances himself from the Academics for precisely this reason.)

This criticism of Empiricism is somewhat limited and esoteric. As far as the avoidance of theory and the reliance on bodies of know-how are concerned, it makes no difference whether one suspends judgment over the possibility of knowing about “unclear” things, or one holds that they definitely cannot be known about. Besides, it looks as if this is an internal dispute among Empiricists, and it is conditional in character. Sextus speaks of “that form of Empiricism” (*hê empeiria ekeinê*, *PH* 1.236), implying that not all Empiricists take this line; and he says that one should suspect Empiricism *if* it goes in this direction, implying that it is not obvious that any Empiricists are in fact guilty of asserting the impossibility of knowing about the unclear. He seems to distance himself from Empiricism on similar grounds at one place in *Against the Logicians* (*M* 8.327), where the topic is demonstration (*apodeixis*), thought of as a method of discovering the real nature of things; the Empiricists are said to reject the possibility of demonstration, whereas the skeptics are said to suspend judgment about its possibility. But in another place in the same book, speaking about the related topic of signs, he says that both the Empiricists and the skeptics hold that unclear things “are not known about” (*mê katalambanesthai*, *M* 8.191), which is consistent with skeptical suspension of judgment on the

possibility of knowing about them. We do not know enough about the history of Empiricism to be able to reconstruct Sextus' position on this matter in detail. But it looks as if he is uneasy about a tendency of some of his Empiricist colleagues or forebears to lean too much (from his perspective as a Pyrrhonist) towards what recent scholarship has called "negative dogmatism"; and his expression of (admittedly partial) approval of the Methodic approach may be his way of putting this point as provocatively as possible.⁹ However, aside from this passage, there is no indication of any link between the Pyrrhonists and the Methodic school of medicine; and, to repeat, Sextus' criticism on this specific point does not detract from the very considerable methodological common ground between Pyrrhonism and Empiricism.

II

The use of medical analogies to clarify the nature of human virtue goes back at least to Plato's *Republic*.¹⁰ Challenged to show that the just person is better off than the unjust person because of the power justice has in the just person's soul (358b, cf. 367e), Socrates argues that justice in the individual, while it may manifest itself in familiar kinds of actions, is fundamentally a certain kind of condition of the soul (443c-d), a condition in which the three elements in the soul – reason, spirit, and appetite – which may potentially be in conflict with one another, are in fact in harmonious relations with one another, each of them performing the function it is naturally supposed to perform. And this condition is then compared to health, since health is, precisely, the condition in which the various elements of the body are in similar harmonious relations,

⁹ That Sextus' unease may have some merit is suggested by a passage of Galen's *Outline of Empiricism* in which Menodotus is criticized for inconsistently lapsing into dogmatic rejection of the Rationalist Asclepiades' theories (83, 13ff. Deichgräber). See Allen 2010, 232-3; Frede 1987a, 248-52.

¹⁰ Nussbaum 1994, 51 finds it in Democritus. But the evidence is inevitably fragmentary. For much more detail on the subject of this section, see Allen 2019.

each performing the function it is naturally supposed to perform (444d). The conclusion, then, is that virtue (*aretê* – Plato switches to the more general term) “would be a kind of health and beauty and good state of the soul, whereas vice is disease and shame and weakness” (444d13-e2). The phrase “a kind of health” (*hygieia tis*) suggests that the notion of health and disease as applied to mental rather than physical conditions is a novelty, but the parallel between justice and physical health is quite precise.¹¹ It also plays an important role in the argument, since it suggests that the answer to the original question is obviously “yes”; who wouldn’t be better off healthy than diseased? We are only at the end of book 4; the *Republic* still has a long way to go. But the identification of justice as a form of health serves as a climax to the first major portion of the *Republic’s* main argument.

Aristotle does not give health such an overarching role in his practical philosophy, but the analogy with health makes an appearance at several key points in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (to cite only the best-known work of his in which it occurs). It comes in the discussion early in book 2 of the development of virtues of character. Observing that too much or too little, in the training of character – that is, pushing the “trainee” too hard or not hard enough – will lead to bad results, he immediately resorts, to reinforce the point, to analogies with strength and health (1104a11-18). He prefaces this account by saying that questions about what to do have no fixed answers, and again, makes the comparison with questions about health (1104a3-5). The analogy also comes up several times at the end of book 6, where the value of practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) is put in question. Aristotle asks how it helps to know what is good and bad

¹¹ Regardless of the use of the term “health”, phenomena that we would call mental illnesses are clearly treated as topics of interest in some of the Hippocratic texts. See Ahonen 2014, chapter 2.

if you are in fact already a good person; after all, being healthy does not require you to know medical science (1143b20-28). His answer involves a reframing of the analogy: it is not practical wisdom, but theoretical wisdom (*sophia*) that creates happiness, and it does so not in the sense of bringing it about (as medicine brings about health), but in the sense of being a component of it (in the way that “health creates health”, he says – that is, as health consists in certain healthy aspects or conditions of the body) (144a3-5). But still, his sense of the naturalness of this parallel is not diminished. A little later, the relation between medicine and health is again used to illuminate the role of practical wisdom in planning the conditions in which theoretical wisdom can flourish, despite the latter being the more valuable of the two (1145a6-9). We can also mention the comparison between the “bestial” character and disease in book 7, chapter 5, and, in the discussion of pleasure in book 10, the parallel between the healthy person and the ethically excellent person as determiners of what is really the case – as the “measure” of things – implicitly contrasting this with a view (attributed by both Plato and Aristotle to Protagoras) that would hold that each person is the measure of how things are for them, with no neutral judgment possible (1176a15-19).¹²

By the time we get to the Hellenistic period, the medical analogy is familiar and entrenched; and at this point health comes to serve explicitly as an analogy not just for human virtue (though it can still play that role), but also for the successful outcome of good philosophy.¹³ Epicurus can reflexively open his letter on ethics, the *Letter to Menoecus*, by calling philosophy “the health of the soul” (*to kata psuchên hugiainon*, DL 10.122); and the

¹² The word “measure” (*metron*) definitely comes from Protagoras. What is less clear is whether Protagoras actually held the radically subjectivist view Plato and Aristotle attribute to him.

¹³ This is the central focus of Nussbaum 1994.

same thought is echoed in the Epicurean *Vatican Sayings* (54, cf. 64). As for the Stoics, virtue, understood as equivalent to wisdom, is the culmination of philosophy properly conducted; it requires an understanding of the nature of the world and of the nature of human beings. Even though they classify health itself (that is, regular physical health) as a preferred indifferent, rather than a good – only virtue and things intrinsically related to virtue qualify as good – they have no hesitation in comparing the cultivation of health in the body with the development of virtue in the soul (Cicero, *On Ends* 5.16; Stobaeus 2.104,24-105,1 Wachsmuth; Musonius Rufus, fragment 3), and also, at times, in speaking of health of the soul as itself equivalent to virtue, or as a kind of virtue. Seneca says that we acquire an understanding of what virtue or the good is by analogy, and one of the analogies is with physical health; from our knowledge of health in the body we acquire a notion of health in the soul, where health in the soul simply is virtue (*Letter* 120.5). The summary of Stoic ethics preserved in Stobaeus and often ascribed to Arius Didymus takes a slightly different line, referring to the health of the soul as a specific kind of virtue supervening on standard virtues such as courage or justice, a virtue that consists in “a good mix of the doctrines in the soul”, just as health in the body is a good mix of hot, cold, wet, and dry (2.62,15-24 Wachsmuth). The author also says that the good person is the best “doctor of himself”, as having knowledge of the factors contributing to health – where “health” must again refer to this health of the soul (2.109,1-4 Wachsmuth).

There would be nothing novel, then, in Sextus using the medical analogy in discussing his philosophical program, even though the fact that he was an actual doctor might give his use of it an extra level of interest. The question now is the extent to which he actually makes use of it.

III

I have not so far mentioned that Sextus (following, it appears, a tradition that stretches all the way back to Pyrrho himself) claims that skeptical suspension of judgment yields an emotional benefit: *ataraxia*, freedom from disturbance or tranquility. The skeptic, he says, started out as someone troubled by uncertainty about the nature of things, and hoping for *ataraxia* through discovering the truth. This does not happen, however, because the competing theories on all kinds of questions keep leading him, instead, to suspension of judgment. Yet it turns out that this suspension of judgment produces precisely the *ataraxia* originally hoped for, and this leads, eventually, to a change of focus, so that one aims directly for suspension of judgment rather than for discovery of the truth – not that the possibility of this is ruled out, as I said (*PH* 1.12, 25-6). The reason why suspension of judgment yields *ataraxia*, despite the outcome being different from the one originally hoped for, is not really spelled out; but it seems to be due to an acceptance of the uncertainty and a consequent release from the stress that originally caused. Sextus also talks several times of a release from the stress accompanying definite beliefs (such as non-skeptics will have) about some things being, in the nature of things, good and to be pursued, and others bad and to be avoided (*PH* 1.27-8, 3.235-8, *M* 11.110-167). It is a controversial question how these two pictures are related to one another. In any case, the *ataraxia* that Sextus identifies as the payoff of his skeptical activity might well be seen as his version of the “health of the soul” that earlier Greek philosophers had seen as the goal or outcome of philosophy properly conducted. Indeed, there is a direct precedent for this in the Epicureans, who also thought of *ataraxia* as the central payoff of their philosophy – although they took this to be achieved by coming to a correct understanding of the world, not by

suspending judgment about the real nature of things. There is nothing specifically medical about the term *ataraxia*, but it certainly can be used in a medical context; it occurs in a discussion of mental illness (denoting the relief desired by a certain class of troubled individuals) in a letter in the Hippocratic corpus (*Ep.* 12). And if one decides to think of the cultivation of *ataraxia*, in oneself or in others, as a kind of quasi-medical treatment, one can certainly come up with a considerable list of parallels between this and the practice of medicine.¹⁴ But how far does Sextus himself think in these terms?

The answer, I shall suggest, is “less than we might have expected”. There are certainly some cases where he does so. The most obvious is perhaps the final chapter of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (3.280-1), where he says that “The skeptic, because of being philanthropic, wishes, as far as possible, to cure (*iasthai*) the dogmatists’ rash notions by argument”. He continues that “just as doctors for bodily ailments have remedies (*boêthêmata*) that are different in size”, so too the skeptic varies the strength of his arguments depending on the strength of the philosophical “ailment” by which the person he is addressing is gripped. The chapter has troubled some commentators, beginning with its title – “Why the skeptic sometimes sees fit to put forward arguments weak in persuasiveness”¹⁵ – which has been felt to be giving up on the norms of rationality one would expect from any philosopher. One scholar, Benson Mates, called this an “odd and silly claim” and insisted that the chapter must have been added later, refusing to believe that Sextus could have written it.¹⁶ But as I said, Sextus describes skepticism itself as

¹⁴ As does Nussbaum 1994. She identifies ten possible parallels between medical practice and philosophical argument understood as analogous to medicine, using this as a framework to consider Aristotle, the Epicureans, Sextus, and the Stoics (46-7); in Sextus’ case, it is argued that eight of the ten apply (296-311).

¹⁵ The chapter titles in *Outlines* are generally thought to be by Sextus himself. But even if they are not, the chapter itself includes the very same point (3.281).

¹⁶ Mates 1996, 314.

an *ability to produce suspension of judgment*, and this naturally will include calibrating the arguments involved so that they have the crucial feature, “equal strength”. Moreover, what counts as “equal strength” in any given case depends on who these arguments are presented to. For two or more arguments to be of “equal strength” is for them to strike the person considering them as equally forceful, and this will clearly vary from one person to another; while the point is not stressed in Sextus’ writing in general, it is clearly implicit in his account of the skeptical “ability”.

Sextus is notably ambivalent about whether skepticism falls under the heading of “philosophy”, and it is in any case a mistake to think of him as a philosopher in the normal mold.¹⁷ But if the chapter casts doubt on Sextus’ standing as a philosopher, at any rate of the standard type, it makes quite explicit the parallel between his practice as a skeptic and medical practice. In both cases, the nature of the “cure” depends on the nature of the “disease”; the skeptic’s preparation of arguments designed to have the right effect on the philosophical “patient” resembles the doctor’s sensitivity to the medical patient’s particular condition when devising the appropriate remedies. Sextus does not actually use the word “remedies” (*boêthêmata*) to describe the skeptic’s own practice, but he could very easily have done so. The word does not necessarily have a medical connotation – the root has the general sense of “help” or “aid” – but it has a history in medical literature, referring to medical remedies in the Hippocratic *On Ancient Medicine* (13) and in the pseudo-Galenic *On the Best Sect* (I.211 Kühn). Another word in the passage that, while obviously capable of broader uses, has a longstanding

¹⁷ I have discussed this in Bett 2019a and 2019b. A similar point is made, from a rather different perspective, by Jonathan Barnes: “Sextan scepticism is not a philosophy: it is a retirement from philosophy” (Barnes 2007, 329).

use in medical contexts is *philanthrôpos*, “philanthropic”; and in this case Sextus does apply the word to the skeptic and not to the doctors themselves. The Hippocratic *On the Physician* opens by describing the character traits and dispositions a doctor ought to have; among other things, he must be *philanthrôpos* (1). Another work in the Hippocratic corpus, *Precepts*, associates this trait – using the noun *philanthrôpia* – with “love of expertise” (*philotechniê*, 6). Galen cites *philanthrôpia*, alongside making money, exemption from public service (or “liturgies”), and love of honor, as a standard motive for going into medicine, and claims that this was in fact the motive of Hippocrates, Empedocles, and other early doctors (*On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato* 9.5.4-6); the adjective is also used in the same passage of *On the Best Sect* cited above, to describe a substantial as opposed to a sparse diet.¹⁸

Another, less obvious case of medical terminology used to describe skeptical practice occurs at the very beginning of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Sextus says that, even in giving his account of skepticism itself, he is not going to lay down the law; instead, he is simply going to report *historikôs* on how things appear to him at the time. Annas and Barnes translate *historikôs* “descriptively”; Mates and Bury both render it by “like a chronicler”, apparently appealing to “history” in our sense (a sense that the Greek word *historia* can certainly have).¹⁹ But the word has a quite precise meaning in medical Empiricism: it refers to a report of one’s medical experience, which can be passed on to others and can therefore serve indirectly as part of their repertoire of experience – or sometimes to a compilation of such reports by multiple

¹⁸ Edelstein 1987, 322 not unreasonably calls Galen’s comment about the early doctors an “unhistorical projection”. But this does not diminish its value as evidence for the association of the term *philanthrôpos* with medicine; that Galen sees fit to call the early doctors *philanthrôpoi* suggests a default assumption that doctors are liable to have this quality.

¹⁹ Annas & Barnes 2000, 3; Mates 1996, 89; Bury 1933, 5.

practitioners.²⁰ Sextus is therefore subtly hinting that his approach to describing skepticism is just like what he and his Empiricist colleagues do in reporting their medical experience. To make this more apparent, I propose the translation “like in case notes” for *historikôs*.

The chapter where Sextus assimilates skepticism to medical Methodism includes another medicine/skepticism parallel. Sextus compares the Methodists’ reliance on what is immediately apparent with the skeptics’ reliance on appearances in everyday life, repeating what he had said earlier in the book about four main categories of everyday appearance, and singling out one of these – “the necessity of how we’re affected” (*anagkê pathôn*) – as especially close to the Methodists’ way of proceeding (*PH* 1.237-9; the earlier passage, where hunger and thirst are his examples, is 1.23-4). The parallel is not perfect: the “ways we’re affected” in the medical case are the symptoms of the patients, to which the doctors respond with appropriate treatment, rather than the doctors’ own experiences – this seems clear from Sextus’ phrase “some of them natural and others against nature” (1.239), which surely refers to the patients’ normal or abnormal physical conditions. But the reason Sextus gives the Methodists’ practice his qualified approval is that it resembles Pyrrhonist practice. The parallel extends beyond the Pyrrhonists’ approach to ordinary life, since the Methodists are also approvingly said to avoid all claims about “unclear” matters (1.237), which would characterize the Pyrrhonists both in ordinary life and in their philosophical activity. However, this case is not

²⁰ Galen, *On the Sects for Beginners*, chapter 2, p.3,17-20 Helmreich, speaks of reports by individuals of their own experience. See also Galen’s *Outlines of Empiricism*, end of chapter 3, p.49 Deichgräber; this work only exists in a medieval Latin translation, but the point is exactly the same and the Latin word is also *historia*. But in chapter 8 of the same work Galen says that the word is sometimes used of what *has been seen* (presumably by other people), sometimes of what one has seen oneself. (Both these texts can be found in translation in Frede 1985.) The notion is attacked at length in a chapter of the pseudo-Galenic *On the Best Sect* (I.143-9 Kühn), where *historia* is again characterized in a way more suggestive of multiple observers, as an account of what has often been tried in the same way (I.144).

quite the same as the previous ones. Aside from the fact that it is only one medical school, not medicine in general, the practice of which is said to resemble skepticism – that is also true of the *historia* case – this is not an instance of skepticism being treated as analogous to medicine, but the reverse: Methodism in medicine is being said to resemble skepticism (more than a certain brand of Empiricism does, at any rate).

Beyond this, it is hard to see an active interest in the medical analogy on Sextus' part. There are many other allusions to medicine in Sextus besides the passages I have just mentioned. But none of them draw the same kind of general parallels between the practice of skepticism and the practice of medicine. One passage of *Against the Ethicists* gives a sort of negative version of the medical analogy we saw in the final chapter of *Outlines*: just as a bad doctor may cure one ailment but cause another via the treatment itself, so a dogmatic philosopher “produces one disease in place of another” (*M* 11.135). Getting someone to care about virtue, for example, instead of wealth does not reduce disturbance but merely redirects it, since thinking that virtue is by nature good is just as anxiety-provoking as thinking that wealth is. This context might seem perfectly adapted for Sextus to go on and say that the Pyrrhonist is the only one who has the *genuine* cure and that skepticism therefore corresponds to medicine at its best. But although he does indeed continue by saying that the skeptic, unlike the dogmatist, frees us from trouble and creates happiness (*M* 11.140), there is not a hint of the medical analogy here.

In two other places Sextus compares something in medicine with something concerning one of the “disciplines” (*mathêmata*) that he deals with in *Against Those in the Disciplines*. In the first book of this work, *Against the Grammarians*, he distinguishes literacy (*grammatistikê*),

which is undeniably useful, from the technical study of language by grammarians, which is not. Literacy is said to be useful in the same way as medicine – namely, by getting rid of troubles, the “trouble” cured by literacy being forgetfulness – in addition to conferring positive benefits, which is characteristic of other kinds of expertise than medicine (*M* 1.51-2). This is not an analogy between skepticism and medicine *per se*, but a partial analogy between an everyday practice approved by skepticism (though hardly peculiar to it) and medicine. At the end of the fifth book, *Against the Astrologers*, Sextus says that whereas in medicine generalizations with no known exceptions are possible, such as the fact that a wound to the heart leads to death, in the alleged discipline of astrology attempts at such generalization are a failure – this, of course, being a condemnation of astrology (*M* 5.104). In this book too, the theoretical discipline of astrology is contrasted with a useful, practical counterpart: a kind of inspection of the sky that Sextus says is called “astronomy”, but which seems to consist in predicting the weather and other terrestrial phenomena (*M* 5.1-2).²¹ Again, we might have expected this skeptically sanctioned expertise to be compared favorably with medicine, as astrology was unfavorably compared. But Sextus says nothing of the sort.

In several places Sextus draws an analogy between something in the skeptic’s toolbox and purgative drugs, and this has sometimes been seen as an indication that he views

²¹ The passage is also puzzling in that Sextus associates the “astronomy” of which he approves with Eudoxus and Hipparchus. Eudoxus was as theoretical as anyone, and while Hipparchus was indeed notable for careful observation (see Netz 2022, 322-30), this was put in the service of projects such as creating accurate models for the motion of the sun and the moon, not for the kind of practical purposes Sextus speaks of. (He is also sometimes said to have written on astrology, but (*pace* Bett 2018, 194) the evidence for this is very tenuous. His astronomical observations would indeed have been useful to astrologers, and the remarks of the Elder Pliny (*Natural History*, 2.24), which seem to associate him with astrology, may be an unwarranted extrapolation from this. For further details see Neugebauer 1975, 331-2.)

skepticism in general through the lens of the medical analogy.²² But in fact, his use of this analogy is quite specific. It has to do with self-applicable features of Pyrrhonist discourse and constitutes a response to possible charges of self-refutation. In two places the subject is arguments against *apodeixis*, “demonstration”, an important element in dogmatic logic and epistemology (*PH* 2.188, *M* 8.480). The possible objection against skepticism is that if the skeptic’s arguments against demonstration are themselves *demonstrative*, they are self-refuting, being an example of precisely what they claim to rule out (whereas if they are not, there is no compelling reason to accept them). Sextus’ reply is that these skeptical arguments may be like purgative drugs that eliminate themselves from the body along with the substances they are purging from it; in this way, while they may indeed cancel themselves out, they are also successful in their goal of ruling out the possibility of demonstration in general. Elsewhere the purgative analogy is applied to the skeptic’s distinctive forms of language expressing a withdrawal from definite assertion; these too, Sextus says, are self-applicable and hence do not amount to any kind of dogmatism (*PH* 1.206 and, for the idea without the purgative analogy, *PH* 1.14-15).²³ The analogy is not original with Sextus; it also appears in Diogenes Laertius’ summary of Pyrrhonism (9.76, applied to skeptical forms of language) and, considerably earlier than either Sextus or Diogenes, in Aristocles of Messene’s polemic against Pyrrhonism (quoted in Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 14.18.21 – applied to self-applicable arguments).²⁴ But it does not carry any implications concerning skepticism itself as a “purgative” device, and Sextus

²² See, e.g., Nussbaum 1994, whose chapter on skepticism is titled “Skeptical Purgatives” and speaks of skepticism as “attaching itself to the medical analogy” (284-5).

²³ For detailed analysis of the purgative and related analogies in Sextus, see Castagnoli 2010, chapter 14.

²⁴ Aristocles was apparently writing soon after Aenesidemus, in the first century BCE, initiated the skeptical tradition appealing to Pyrrho as a model, of which Sextus was a much later member; see Chiesara 2001, 134-5.

never suggests anything of the kind; it is just one particular item in the Pyrrhonist's collection of argumentative techniques.

Sextus employs medical examples in numerous other places, but again, without suggesting any general lessons about skepticism as a kind of quasi-medical treatment. There are several in the discussion of "sophisms" alluded to earlier (*PH* 2.230-3, 237-40, 245). In one of these passages, the doctor's knowledge is said to be more effective in resolving the sophisms than the logician's supposed expertise, and some quite specific medical advice is included (*PH* 2.237-40); this is also one of the places where Sextus indicates that he is himself a doctor. But the passage carries no discernible implications beyond the immediate context, while in the other passages, the medical elements are strictly confined to the sophisms themselves. Sextus' other references to himself as a doctor are equally unhelpful for our purpose. In one, he simply refers to Asclepius as "the founder of our science" in the course of a long series of examples illustrating the particularity of history, and hence its resistance to being studied by any kind of systematic expertise (*M* 1.260). In the other, he says that he is going to focus on health as his example, because as a doctor he is familiar with it (*M* 11.47). But health is simply an example of a topic about which there is pervasive disagreement; he could have chosen many others, and there is no hint that Pyrrhonism itself should be understood as the production of a kind of health.

In two places Sextus says that sometimes the observers of (or perhaps, the assistants at) a surgery may suffer more than the patient (*PH* 3.236, *M* 11.159). But here the point is to emphasize a recurring (and not altogether convincing) point of his: that opinions to the effect that certain things are really, or by nature, good or bad are massively disturbing. Again, I don't

see any indication of Pyrrhonism itself being regarded as a kind of therapy. Earlier I mentioned the discussion of signs in *Against the Logicians* as a place where Sextus treats medical Empiricism and skepticism as in agreement. This passage also includes a few examples of actual or possible signs in medicine (*M* 8.188, 204); but the point of the examples is limited to the immediate context. The same is true of a number of examples in the Ten Modes: Sextus cites people with unusual tolerance of things that would poison most people, and people with unusual intolerance of things that most people consume without any ill effects (*PH* 1.81-4), as well as cases of substances that may be either health-giving or harmful, depending on the amount consumed or the way the substance is prepared (*PH* 1.130-3). In the latter passage the medical examples are interspersed with non-medical ones, and the point is simply that the qualities of things vary depending on their quantity or arrangement. In the former passage the examples are almost all medical or at least physiological; but the general point they are supposed to illustrate is that there is a wide variety in human preferences – a variety supposedly due, Sextus says, to differences in the proportions of the various humors in the body (*PH* 1.80). As elsewhere, the choice of medical examples no doubt reflects Sextus' particular proclivities; but they are not essential to the point being made – other kinds of examples could, or actually do, make the point just as well – and they do not imply a conception of skepticism as itself analogous to medical treatment. The same is true of the doctor's possession of expertise in contrast to the grammarian's lack of it (*M* 1.255) and an alleged etymology of the word for medicine (*iatrikê*, *M* 1.45).

In one place Sextus actually contrasts philosophy and medicine: in an argument against rhetoric's standing as an expertise (*technê*), philosophy is cited as an example of an expertise

having an end that is “stable and solid” (*hestêkos ... kai pagion*), whereas medicine is one that aims for “what’s mostly so” (*tou hôs to polu*). Not much should be made of this. As I said, Sextus is ambivalent about whether to consider skepticism a philosophy, and the conception of philosophy he appeals to here may be a dogmatic kind with which he would not want to associate himself; skepticism has to vary its approach like medicine, as he says in the final chapter of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, and this might well seem to place skepticism alongside medicine as directed towards “what’s mostly so”. Nevertheless, with all due respect to the undoubted, explicit medical analogy between skeptical practice and medical practice in that final chapter, passages that suggest this analogy are rare in Sextus’ surviving works. Jonathan Barnes speaks of “the medical simile which the sceptics loved”.²⁵ I don’t see a real love here, just an occasional inclination.

IV

But maybe we shouldn’t concern ourselves too much with what Sextus actually says about the medical analogy. Perhaps he thought it was obvious and therefore rarely deserved to be mentioned. As I have shown, he appeals not infrequently to medical examples and medical analogies in specific contexts; this surely reflects his own immersion in the field of medicine, and as we have also seen, he shows some signs of acknowledging the common ground between his own medical approach, Empiricism, and Pyrrhonism. Thus a general analogy between skepticism and medicine may well have been something he just took for granted. Still, regardless of what Sextus may have assumed, or how much or little he makes this an explicit

²⁵ Barnes 1997, 90.

theme, it is worth considering how far viewing his skeptical method in these terms is useful or illuminating for ourselves.

There is clearly some merit in doing so; Pyrrhonian skepticism has an important focus in common with other ancient Greek philosophical schools, and the medical analogy was designed to highlight this very focus. Philosophy was generally conceived, at least from Socrates on, as *improving the lives* of those who practiced it, and Sextus' Pyrrhonism is no exception. In most cases, this was understood as a process by which one came to fulfil better one's nature as a human being; the philosophical person achieved to a greater extent the condition a human being naturally aspired to, and the analogy of physical health is very intuitive in this context. Sextus does not, of course, sign on to the presuppositions underlying conceptions such as "the true nature of a human being"; that would have involved him in speculation about things that are "unclear". But arguably, his Empiricist brand of medicine would not have signed on to presuppositions of that sort either. The Empiricists' conception of the healthy body cannot have been based on any theoretical picture of what the good condition of the body consisted in; it must itself have been empirical in character, involving common observation of those human beings who seem to be in good shape and those who do not. So Sextus' avoidance of any theoretical conception of the true nature of human beings does not reduce the cogency of the analogy with medicine as he himself practiced medicine.

Nevertheless, it is not obvious that medicine is the *only* good model for the ameliorative aspect of ancient Greek philosophy, Pyrrhonism included. Pierre Hadot, who did as much as anyone to draw attention to the ancient notion of "philosophy as a way of life", preferred to emphasize what he called "spiritual exercises", deriving the term from a title of a book by the

Christian writer Saint Ignatius of Loyola, but arguing that Ignatius was appealing to a practice that was central in the philosophy of antiquity.²⁶ Spiritual exercises are habits of attention that aim to make clear to oneself how one is doing, in terms of philosophical progress, and to advance one along the path of that progress. Hadot does not speak a great deal about Pyrrhonian skepticism, but it is clear that he regarded it as fitting the pattern that he saw (perhaps excessively) as characterizing almost all ancient Greco-Roman philosophy.²⁷ And indeed, skeptics in Sextus' telling do need to be attentive to how they are doing with regard to suspension of judgment, what will maintain or strengthen that condition, and what the emotional consequences are of success or failure in that regard.²⁸ Hadot's work also influenced Foucault, whose notion of "care of the self" has a good deal in common with that of "spiritual exercises"; Foucault was not, of course, primarily a historian of ancient thought, but he shows considerable interest in ancient examples of "care of the self".²⁹ These ways of thinking about the practical dimension of Greek philosophy are by no means entirely unlike the medical analogy; but they do not invoke explicitly medical concepts. The same is true of the various contemporary projects that aim at reviving Stoicism as a way of life, or at least as a helpful resource for improving one's life; psychotherapists are among those involved in these projects, but the approach of these movements has little to do with notions of disease, cure, or the like.³⁰

²⁶ See Hadot 1995a, especially chapters 3 and 4.

²⁷ On skepticism, see Hadot 1995a, 56-7, 104, 266; also Hadot 1995b, 174-7, 222-6.

²⁸ Sextus' most extensive discussion of the good or bad emotional effects of skepticism or dogmatism occurs in two chapters of *Against the Ethicists* (M 11.110-67); in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, see 1.25-30, 3.235-8.

²⁹ See Foucault 1986. For some reservations Hadot expressed about Foucault's application of his notion of "care of the self" to ancient philosophies, see Hadot 1995a, chapter 7.

³⁰ See, for example, the website Modern Stoicism, <https://modernstoicism.com> (accessed 06/09/23). Two members of the Steering Team for Modern Stoicism are Tim LeBon and Donald Robertson, both psychotherapists using the cognitive-behavioral approach, which is far removed from more characteristically medical approaches in psychiatry.

I have widened my attention beyond skepticism, because in its goal of improving one's life, skepticism is no different from much other Greek philosophy. It is this that the medical analogy most centrally intends to capture, although, as we have just seen, there may be other ways of capturing it that do just as well. But narrowing down again to the specific case of skepticism, it is worth noting that the orientation towards helping *others* – surely a central feature of medicine on any conception – is far from prominent in Sextus. And this suggests a further respect in which the medical analogy may be less than compelling as applied to him.

The notion of helping others is undeniably present in the final chapter of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, where, as we saw, Sextus speaks of being *philanthrôpos* and therefore of wishing to cure the dogmatists (*PH* 3.280). But one reason why this chapter has often struck scholars as odd is that this is the *only* place where he speaks in such explicit terms of wishing to help others. There is something resembling this in a passage of *Against the Ethicists* that we also saw earlier. Sextus says that a person who is troubled by the conviction that some things are of great value can be freed from this trouble by being freed from the conviction, which the skeptic is uniquely equipped to do; he adds that “it is skepticism's achievement, therefore, to procure the happy life” (*M* 11.140). I noted that Sextus does not appeal here to the medical analogy, though the context might seem tailor-made for him to do so. But at least there is some sense of the skeptic as helping others. Beyond this, it is very difficult to see any passages that draw attention to this theme. While it seems clear that Sextus is addressing both skeptics and non-skeptics, and while he is very clear about the benefits of skepticism, the goal of converting non-skeptics for *their* benefit gets very little mention. By contrast, there is an openly didactic or proselytizing aspect to much of the writings of the Epicureans and the Stoics; one of their aims (albeit not the

only one) is to convert the reader, for the reader's benefit, to their own way of thinking. This is obvious in Lucretius on the Epicurean side, and perhaps still more so in Diogenes of Oenoanda, who had a large public inscription made at his own expense, with the purpose, as he says, of curing people of their harmful and mistaken ideas about the world (fragments 2-3 Smith).³¹ On the Stoic side it is equally clear in the letters of Seneca, the surviving fragments of Musonius Rufus, and the *Discourses* of Epictetus.³² Also notable is the "outreach" element in Epicureanism and Stoicism. Epicurus' *Kuriai Doxai* (*Principal Doctrines*, DL 10.139-54) and Epictetus' *Handbook* are collections of short, pithy sayings, designed to encapsulate the essentials of Epicurean and Stoic teaching for a broad public and hence to expand the range of its benefit to humanity. There is nothing like this in Sextus.

In my introduction I raised the question whether Sextus' role as a doctor made the medical analogy more applicable to his brand of Pyrrhonian skepticism than to the other philosophies that appealed to it. The last point would tend to suggest that it does not. Still, there may be more to be said. At the start of his book *Empiricisms*, Barry Allen says that "The birthplace of empiricism is ancient Greek medicine, and history's empiricisms are not uncommonly homesick for the wisdom European civilization acquired from ancient medicine".³³ If we take this seriously, we might come to the view that Empiricist medicine is truest to the spirit of the medical profession itself, and that a philosophical outlook with clear links with Empiricist medicine, both in its approach and in the identities of several of its adherents, would

³¹ The medical analogy is prominent in this part of the inscription. Ordinary people are in the grip of disease (*nosos*, fr. 3.IV.7, 3.IV.12), and Diogenes is bringing remedies (*boêthêmata*, fr. 3.V.10) and medicines (*pharmaka*, fr. 3.V.1-2).

³² Inwood 2007, xv-xviii cautions against focusing on this aspect of Seneca at the expense of others and against ignoring the subtlety of his authorial voice. But he does not deny that a role Seneca regularly adopts in the letters is that of guide to self-improvement.

³³ Allen 2021, 11.

therefore be more “authentically” medical in character than others. However, the Empiricist approach to medicine is not the only ancient approach, and the more doctrinal approaches known as Rationalist may be just as comparable to the more doctrinal Greek philosophies as Empiricism is to Sextus’ Pyrrhonism.³⁴ Sextus’ philosophical approach is certainly closer to *his* brand of medicine than the other philosophies are; but it is not necessarily closer to ancient medicine in general, and the fact that he actually practiced medicine does not change this. Besides, sensitivity to individual context, which is important to any good medical practice, is no less a feature of the Stoic and Epicurean approaches to self-improvement than of the Pyrrhonism of Sextus.³⁵

In a volume on skepticism and medicine, one might have hoped that we would have found more of a special connection between Sextus’ skeptical outlook and medicine. Still, the connections are certainly there, as I have tried to illustrate, even if Sextus does not outshine other ancient philosophies in this respect and even if he does not himself give them a great deal of attention. Besides, if we step back a little from the historical context, we might perhaps hold on to a version of the thought suggested by Barry Allen’s remark. That is, we might think that, whatever may be the case concerning ancient Greek medical approaches, the way medicine *should* proceed, and does proceed at its best, is in a broadly empirical manner, eschewing top-down theory, and that Sextus’ Pyrrhonism and its companion medical approach, Empiricism, are closer in spirit to this than other ancient philosophies or ancient medical approaches. I am not

³⁴ Barry Allen has a broader understanding of empiricism than that of the ancient Empiricist school, and he regards Galen, who finds valuable elements in both Rationalism and Empiricism, as a paradigm of empirical inquiry in his sense. Nonetheless, he tends to share Galen’s view of a pure medical Rationalism as simply missing what medicine is supposed to be about. See Allen 2021, chapter 1, sections 4-6.

³⁵ Such context-sensitivity plays a role in several of the ten medical-philosophical parallels developed, and applied to all three schools, in Nussbaum 1994 (cf. n.14).

sure how much there is to this idea. But it seems to have some promise, and perhaps some of the other essays in this volume can shed light on this question.³⁶

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July 2024

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³⁶ I presented versions of this paper at the Hellenistic Philosophy Society (meeting at the APA Pacific Division, Portland, Oregon), at the University of São Paulo, and at "The Significance of Scepticism in Philosophy, Judaism, and Culture", a conference held in July 2024 at the Maimonides Center for Advanced Studies, University of Hamburg. I thank the audiences at all these venues for their helpful and thought-provoking comments.

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