The picture of skepticism in philosophy today, at least in the English-speaking world, is different in several ways from the skepticism of the ancient Greco-Roman world. First, there is a difference in subject-matter. Skepticism nowadays is regarded largely, if not entirely, as a certain sort of position in epistemology; it consists in denying that we can have knowledge, or perhaps even reasonable belief, about some major area in which we normally take ourselves to have these things. The “external world” (that is, the world independent of our immediate experience), other minds besides our own, and induction are central examples. The recent volume *Skepticism: from Antiquity to the Present* (Machuca & Reed 2018) includes fourteen chapters in its contemporary section, of which twelve are clearly on epistemological topics; of the two possible exceptions, one, on moral skepticism, begins “The moral skeptic denies (or at least refuses to affirm) that anyone has moral knowledge” (Joyce 2018: 714), while the other, on religious skepticism, after stating at the outset that in a loose usage anyone who is negative about religion may be called a religious skeptic, adds that in a “more illuminating understanding” (to be followed in the chapter), religious skepticism has to do with “being in doubt” (Schellenberg 2018: 727). Clearly, skepticism as understood today revolves around questions concerning knowledge or its absence.

But in antiquity it was not like this. To take just the surviving works of Sextus Empiricus, skepticism could be, and was, applied to issues in all three standard areas of philosophy – logic (including what we call epistemology, but much else besides),
physics, and ethics – as well as to numerous specialized sciences: grammar, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astrology, and music. And while Sextus’ arguments often take the form of questioning the justification for theories in these areas, they are also often to the effect that the basic entities accepted in these theories do not exist, with issues concerning our ability to know about these entities playing no part in the discussion. Epistemology was not at the center of skepticism in the ancient world, as it is today.

I just said that skepticism as understood today is a certain sort of position: that is, a conclusion supported by some arguments. In this respect, too, it differs from skepticism in antiquity. Ancient skepticism was not a claim or a thesis; rather, it was a certain sort of attitude – an attitude of suspension of judgment. The skeptic brings about suspension of judgment on some topic, through the juxtaposition of equally powerful opposing considerations. These considerations very often take the form of arguments, though not always; sometimes they consist in everyday impressions, such as that there are objects in motion of various kinds. As Sextus says, the skeptic’s “ability” is that of placing in opposition “things that appear and things that are thought” (PH 1.8). But even when arguments are involved (and even when, like those I referred to above as “Sextus’ arguments”, they give every appearance of having been devised by the skeptics themselves), the skeptic is not in the business of endorsing the conclusions of those arguments. Instead, the point is to achieve a situation of equipoise, where suspension of judgment is the only possible result\(^2\). As Sextus’ characterization of skepticism as an “ability” (\textit{dunamis}, PH 1.8) implies, the ancient skeptic does not \textit{assert} something, but \textit{does} something – namely, generates suspension of judgment.
I have focused so far on Sextus, but the points I have considered seem to be common ground between him and the skeptical thinkers in the Hellenistic period of Plato’s Academy, primarily Arcesilaus and Carneades – though our evidence for them is incomplete and indirect. All these also share a further point that sharply distinguishes them from the image of the skeptic in contemporary philosophy. Skepticism in antiquity was regarded as something to be lived, rather than just pondered in a theoretical frame of mind. In this respect it was no different from any other ancient philosophical outlook; it was universally assumed that any philosophy worth taking seriously had to be possible to incorporate into one’s life. Many non-skeptical philosophers thought that skepticism did not meet this standard, which is why the so-called apraxia, or “inactivity” objection – that suspension of judgment, at least on the scale the skeptics purported to adopt it, was impossible to put into practice – was a major challenge. But the skeptics had answers to this. Arcesilaus and Carneades clearly took the trouble to show that suspension of judgment was not incompatible with living a human life, or even with happiness (Sextus, M 7.158, 166-89, Cicero, Acad. 2.99-104). And Sextus, in common with his forebears in the Pyrrhonian skeptical tradition (claiming inspiration from the figure of Pyrrho of Elis), took suspension of judgment to have an important practical payoff, namely ataraxia or freedom from worry; skepticism, then, was not only practically possible, but an outlook to be welcomed on practical grounds.

The contrast with skepticism as discussed today could hardly be more stark. For one thing, it is very unusual for philosophers today to identify themselves as skeptics (which is why I have used circumlocutions like “the image of the skeptic”, “skepticism as currently discussed”, etc.); skepticism is usually seen as a threat to be dispelled, not as an
attitude to be willingly adopted. This may be less true of moral skepticism than of strictly epistemological skepticism, but self-identified skeptics on any topic today are few and far between. Moreover, whether or not one decides to adopt it, skepticism today is rarely, if ever, even considered as something to be lived; instead, it is treated as purely theoretical. This is true even of moral skepticism, which one might have thought would be closer to the practical domain; those who profess some form of moral skepticism seem to see no problem in holding on to ordinary moral opinions. Equally, on epistemological topics narrowly understood, there is never any suggestion that one might actually give up the everyday practices of justification, claiming to be sure, etc. that skepticism on those topics seems to put into question.

These differences are relatively straightforward. In what follows I would like to consider some differences, and also some similarities, that are less obvious. What I have in mind are the varying attitudes in ancient Greek and contemporary philosophy concerning whether, or in what ways, skepticism is either natural or unnatural. The lines of thinking that lead to skepticism are often portrayed in recent philosophy as extremely natural for us – alarmingly so, seeing that the conclusion is one that almost everyone today wants to resist. But there are others who emphasize, by contrast, the unnatural character of skeptical ways of thinking, at least by comparison with our everyday practices of justification, assessment of knowledge claims, etc. What is meant by “natural” in this context is not generally spelled out. But a natural attitude or line of thought, as the philosophers who address this topic intend the term, seems to be one that any normal person would unreflectively adopt, or one that any normal person who did reflect on it, unprompted by any particular theoretical or ideological agenda, would find
themselves inclined to accept – one that, as we might put it, “just feels right”. By contrast, an unnatural line of thought would be one that a person would be drawn to only given certain specific and questionable assumptions, of which they might or might not be conscious. There is, of course, a normative element in the phrase “any normal person”, appealing implicitly to some conception of human nature; but none of the philosophers I shall discuss delve into that topic to any extent. Nonetheless, the notion of naturalness employed here seems intuitive enough.

The ancient skeptics do not have much to say explicitly about whether or how skepticism is natural or the opposite. But I think it is not hard to infer certain attitudes of theirs that would bear upon this subject, and these I will try to explicate. In taking up these questions on the modern side, I will venture beyond just the Anglophone philosophy of the past few decades. For in rendering these verdicts on the naturalness or otherwise of skepticism, contemporary philosophers often appeal to a history of treatments of skepticism that extends back to Descartes.

II

Hume makes a sharp distinction between the attitudes we hold in everyday life, and those we adopt when thinking philosophically, including skeptically. He is certainly not the first to draw some such distinction; Descartes’ “project of pure enquiry”, as it has been called (Williams 1978), is explicitly undertaken from a perspective detached from everyday life, with a view to finding a foundation for knowledge that does not depend on possibly questionable everyday assumptions. He is also certainly not the last, and we will explore this further. But it is useful to begin with Hume, because he puts into clear focus the issue about the naturalness or otherwise of skeptical lines of thought. For Hume, it is
the everyday attitudes, not those entertained when one is philosophizing in a skeptical
vein, that are almost always described as the natural ones. In the famous Conclusion of
the first book of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, he vividly describes the intellectual
despair that skeptical thinking can induce, but then speaks of how dinner and a game of
backgammon with friends makes this anxiety seem “cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous”. It
is the latter frame of mind that he calls his “natural propensity” (*Hume* 1978: 269), and it
has a powerful influence even on those like himself who are inclined to philosophy. Nor
is this a bad thing, given that, as he sees it, the pure activity of the understanding leads to
it undermining itself; “We save ourselves from this total scepticism,” he says, only
because these kinds of abstract thinking – these “remote views of things”, in his words –
come to us much less readily than everyday views, “which are more easy and natural”
(268). Indeed, the very effort to engage in pure philosophical reasoning, he suggests,
requires that he “must strive against the current of nature” (269). A similar picture
appears in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, where he says that when
skeptical principles “are put in opposition to the more powerful principles of our nature,
they vanish like smoke, and leave the most determined sceptic in the same condition as

Hume, then, sees our habitual trust in our senses and in ordinary ways of thinking
as natural, and it would seem to follow that philosophical reasoning, especially when it
leads in a skeptical direction, so as to undermine those ordinary ways of thinking – as, in
his hands, it often does – is contrary to nature. Yet an obvious question at this point might
be, is not our ability to reason also part of human nature? And if so, does this not make
skepticism itself natural, if this is where our reasoning points? While Hume does not
generally seem to view the matter this way, in one place in the *Enquiry*, speaking of a skeptical line of argument that “shocks the clearest and most natural principles of human reason”, he says that “what renders the matter more extraordinary, is, that these seemingly absurd opinions are supported by a chain of reasoning, the clearest and most natural” (Hume 1977: 107-8). So it looks as if Hume is not immune to the suspicion that there is also something natural about the kind of reasoning that leads to skepticism.

Whatever we may think about Hume, that is certainly a thought that has occurred to some philosophers more recently. Barry Stroud, in his landmark book *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Stroud 1984), says of the skeptical reasoning in Descartes’ first *Meditation* that “we find it immediately gripping. It appeals to something deep in our nature and seems to raise a real problem about the human condition. It is natural to feel that either we must accept the literal truth of the conclusion that we can know nothing about the world around us, or else we must somehow show that it is not true” (39). Of course, that is by no means the end of the story. Stroud locates this sense of the naturalness of skepticism in a certain traditional conception of objectivity – “the idea that the world is there quite independently of human knowledge and belief” – that itself seems to consist of “platitudes we would all accept” (82). Hence the only ways to avoid skepticism would be to reject that conception of objectivity, or to show that skeptical reasoning actually depends on covert assumptions that are anything but platitudes. Much of the book consists of an examination of various attempts to do the latter, none of which Stroud ultimately finds satisfactory. The outcome is that skepticism remains unrefuted; and though there also remains the overriding thought that there must be something wrong with that, Stroud emphasizes that reflection on this situation itself may “reveal something
deep or important about human knowledge or human nature or the urge to understand them philosophically” (ix).

Stroud is a central example of this kind of picture, but he is by no means the only one. Bernard Williams, in writing about Descartes’ project, also spoke of knowledge itself as having “something in it which offers a standing invitation to scepticism” (Williams 1978: 64); this “something” he refers to as the “absolute conception of reality”, which is very much the same as the conception of objectivity outlined by Stroud. And Thomas Nagel, in his book *The View from Nowhere* (Nagel 1986), develops the idea of a pair of human perspectives, which he calls subjective and objective, and the impossibility of fully combining them. Skepticism is one manifestation of the objective perspective – more specifically, it consists in the idea of a fully objective perspective, along with the recognition that we could never actually occupy such a perspective; as such, skepticism “is revealing and not refutable” (7). But since the objective perspective is not the only one – and since the objective perspective itself, in different and less extreme manifestations, is also responsible for achievements such as natural science and morality – skepticism is not something that we can hold consistently in view. These dual perspectives and the tension between them, Nagel says, are “a problem that faces every creature with the impulse and the capacity to transcend its particular point of view and to conceive of the world as a whole” (3). It now looks as if there is a bifurcated human nature: the attitudes that Hume described as natural make up one side of the story, but (as Hume only rarely acknowledged) there is also an equally natural mindset that contains within it an impulse towards skepticism.
But not everyone is convinced. The very title of Michael Williams’ book *Unnatural Doubts* (Williams 1996) reveals his dissent. After drawing attention to the kind of thinking I have just described, in all these philosophers and more, Williams goes on to develop a view according to which skeptical doubt is very far from being natural; it is, rather, the product of a particular theoretical conception. Stated most generally, this can be called “epistemological realism”, which is the idea that “our knowledge of the world” amounts to “a genuine totality, and thus … a possible object of wholesale assessment” (113), an idea that itself depends on epistemological foundationalism – that is, the view that knowledge as such must be based on some kind of common and fixed starting-points. But, as Williams argues, this idea is by no means self-evident, and in fact what counts as knowledge, and the kinds of standards invoked for calling it knowledge, in different contexts vary so much that there is no reason to think of knowledge as forming such a unified totality. The result is that “there is no such thing as knowledge of the external world” (xii), or of any of the other broad categories I referred to as I began. This does not mean we cannot know the kinds of things we ordinarily take ourselves to know – quite the opposite; it means that knowledge of the external world (or of other minds, or whatever) does not form a genuine kind that can, as a whole, be the object of philosophical scrutiny. Thus Williams concludes that “The Humean condition and the human condition are not the same” (359)⁵.

Williams’ book was a powerful reply to those disposed to see skeptical reasoning as something natural. However, that feeling has not entirely gone away, and again this is apparent in the titles of two more recent books. Stroud’s views have evolved, and he is now inclined to regard the very conception of a pure objectivity – the conception that, as
we saw, seems to make skepticism irresistible – as ultimately not available to us. But his more recent book *Engagement and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction* (Stroud 2011) evinces a sense that there is something disappointing about that state of affairs, or, in Stroud’s own words, that we have “a metaphysical urge, or need, that cannot be denied” (159) – that is, a powerful *aspiration* towards such an objective viewpoint, even if it is bound to remain unfulfilled. And once again, reflection about this is, in effect, reflection about “the human condition” (160). More recently still, Duncan Pritchard’s book *Epistemic Angst* (Pritchard 2016) purports to solve the problem of skepticism. The solution is complicated, but we need not concern ourselves with that; my interest is in where Pritchard thinks this leaves us. Despite the fact that the skeptical challenge is said to have been resolved, and our epistemic angst therefore relieved, there is nonetheless still a descendant of that angst, an anxiety that he calls “epistemic vertigo”. And this is due to “the fact that radical skepticism, while being in many ways very unnatural … nonetheless arises out of very natural intellectual inclinations and aspirations”, which he goes on to describe as centering around a drive towards “a *completely* detached perspective” (187), something that again looks very like the conception of objectivity identified by Stroud and Bernard Williams.

Obviously I have only scratched the surface of a large and complicated topic. But I hope I have said enough to show that the question of whether, and how, skeptical reasoning is natural or unnatural is an important bone of contention in contemporary Anglophone philosophy and some of its antecedents. In the remainder of the paper, I want to try to see what the ancient Greco-Roman skeptics might have thought about this topic – focusing, as before, mainly on Sextus Empiricus.
We may start, however, with a suggestive remark attributed to Pyrrho, the supposed original skeptic. We are told that Pyrrho was once scared by a dog that attacked him, and in response to someone who criticized his failure to maintain skeptical equanimity, said that “it was difficult entirely to strip off one’s humanity; but that one should fight as much as possible against troubles, first in deeds, and failing that, at least in words” (DL 9.66). The idea seems to be that our natural human tendency is to be troubled by everyday annoyances such as snarling dogs, but that it would be better if one could rise above this. That is a difficult task, but it is worth doing the best one can to cease being concerned with such matters; a truly skeptical frame of mind would free one from these concerns – the reason being, I suspect, that one would cease to think of them (or of anything) as really being bad (or good). In this picture, the natural attitude is the non-skeptical one in which snarling dogs do bother us, and skepticism, to the extent one can achieve it, enables us to transcend our natures. So skepticism is not worrying, but a release from everyday worries, and there is no suggestion that skepticism itself is a natural attitude; this looks very different from anything one would be likely to find in philosophy today. However, this is an isolated comment, and it would be unwise to try to build much upon it. From now on I shall confine myself to Sextus Empiricus, of whom we have actual writings to consult.

One important difference between Sextus and most contemporary philosophers, implicit in my remarks in the first section, is that Sextus does not take his skepticism to contradict his everyday conduct of life. In one sense this is obvious: since, as we saw, skepticism in the ancient period is not a proposition, but a posture of suspension of
judgment, it could not serve as one side of a contradiction. But is there even a broader kind of tension between the skeptical posture and everyday life? Sextus will insist, on the contrary, that his everyday attitudes are perfectly compatible with skepticism; that is the whole point of skepticism being livable. By contrast, almost everyone dealing with skepticism today would say that a skeptical conclusion – such as “we cannot know anything about the external world” – is plainly in conflict with a great many things we take for granted in our everyday lives – such as “I know there was a carton of milk in the refrigerator this morning”.

I say “almost everyone” because one strand of thought in contemporary philosophy distinguishes between a “plain” and a “philosophical” way of speaking, and treats “we cannot know anything about the external world”, when delivered in the philosophical register, as not genuinely conflicting with a statement such as “I know there was a carton of milk in the refrigerator this morning”, delivered in the plain register. (This is most apparent in Clarke 1972.) However, this position is difficult to make sense of, and almost everyone who discusses skepticism nowadays takes it as a challenge to a great deal of what we ordinarily believe – which they could not do if they thought plain and philosophical statements simply talked past one another.\(^6\)

Let us come more directly to the issue of naturalness. Whether or not one takes skeptical thinking to be in some way natural, it is surely common ground in modern philosophy to regard our everyday attitudes as natural, even though this point receives rather more explicit attention in Hume than today. And I think there is good evidence that Sextus, too, takes his everyday attitudes to be natural. The way the skeptic can make choices and act, Sextus says, is in light of how things appear, without any commitment to
whether they really are as they appear. He singles out four classes of appearances as particularly important, and his comments on these provide a somewhat fuller picture of the skeptic’s everyday mindset (PH 1.21-4). The first he calls “guidance of nature”, and about this he simply says “we are naturally such as to perceive and to think”. In the case of sense-perception, the idea must be that things strike us as red or blue, or as loud, or as pungent, or as sweet, and all this happens through the natural operation of our senses. Presumably something similar applies to thought: the natural operation of our minds leads us to find certain thought-processes intuitive and others the reverse – for example, it goes against the grain to accept both poles of a contradiction, whereas inferring Q from P together with “P, therefore Q”, or assuming that the sun will rise tomorrow because it always has before, comes naturally. Large parts of how we react to the world around us, then, are due simply to the way we human beings are. Sextus’ second class of appearances is the “necessity of feelings” – things such as hunger, thirst and susceptibility to pleasure and pain; these too account for a great many decisions and actions, and it clearly makes sense to regard them also as natural. And even though the other two – the “handing down of customs and habits” and the “teaching of crafts” – might be classified as cultural rather than natural, their ability to function as they do is no doubt also partly a product of the perceptual and cognitive capacities that he identifies as natural.

All this is no great surprise. More interesting is the question that we have seen to be controversial in the modern period: whether skeptical thinking itself is natural. Sextus never says this in so many words, but his account of how skepticism originates may well suggest an affirmative answer. He tells us that people “of great nature” (megalophueis, PH
1.12) were troubled by the difficulty of sorting out what is true about the world and what is false. Their aim was to settle this and thereby be free of worry. But this is not what happens. Instead, they find themselves impressed by disputes between equally powerful opposing positions, and being unable to choose between them, they inevitably suspend judgment – which, it turns out, produces the freedom from worry they were seeking in the first place (PH 1.26). As Sextus represents the matter, this is simply the outcome they find themselves led towards, based on the competing considerations and the relative strength – that is, the equal strength – with which these strike them. At least for these people of elevated nature, then, it sounds as if this skeptical result is one to which their natures as unusually active inquirers leads them. Again, unlike those contemporary philosophers who regard skeptical thinking as natural, this is not a source of anxiety – quite the opposite; but as regards the naturalness of skepticism itself, there does not seem to be much separating them and Sextus.

However, this picture of skepticism as a result to which some people are naturally drawn is not consistent in Sextus. For he also famously describes skepticism as an ability to generate suspension of judgment through the juxtaposition of opposing considerations on any issue (PH 1.8), and it seems clear that this ability is at work in most of his voluminous writings. Maintaining one’s skepticism, then, is apparently something that takes active and ongoing effort, as well as a deliberately crafted technique. This is perhaps particularly obvious in the various sets of Modes, which are ready-made devices for producing or maintaining suspension of judgment. So now it looks as if skepticism is not a result that anyone inclined towards inquiry will find natural, but something that needs to be kept up by special procedures. The payoff, of course, is the tranquility
(ataraxia) that Sextus insists is the accompaniment to suspension of judgment. But this has to be worked at through repeated exercise of the skeptical “ability”. If anything, on this picture, it is dogmatism – that is, the commitment to definite views, which Sextus presents as the opposite of skepticism – to which one would be naturally inclined, and the skeptical ability must be deployed to guard against this natural tendency. This perhaps brings us closer to the account suggested by the anecdote about Pyrrho with which I began this section. And of course, any dogmatist or non-skeptic would be happy to accept this, except for the part about the comparative benefits of skepticism.

It is not entirely clear how to reconcile these two accounts: the one in which skepticism is what people “of great nature” are inevitably drawn to because of their inability to choose between competing ideas, and the one in which skepticism is an achievement requiring the exercise of a special “ability”. Perhaps the idea is that once suspension of judgment, together with its unexpected byproduct tranquility\(^9\), has been produced enough times (along the lines of the first account), one comes to see that this suggests a recipe for tranquility – which, to recall, was the original goal – and so (along the lines of the second account) one starts to manufacture devices for reliably generating suspension of judgment. One might wish Sextus had said more to make this clear. But even if I am right about how best to connect the two accounts, there is still a tension between them; one implies that skepticism is natural, at least for a certain kind of person, while the other implies that it comes about through deliberate artifice (which is worth the trouble given the tranquility that ensues).

This ambivalence in Sextus is paralleled by another. In discussing modern philosophy I have spoken of a simple contrast between philosophical reflection and
everyday attitudes. But in the case of Sextus, I have been careful to speak of *his* everyday attitudes, or *the skeptic’s* everyday attitudes. The reason is that it is a difficult question whether the everyday attitudes that Sextus attributes to the skeptic are also everyday attitudes that he would attribute to people in general. Sometimes it seems as if Sextus is portraying the skeptic as in tune with ordinary life, with the philosophical dogmatists as the outliers. This is suggested when, as an example of the “hanging down of laws and customs”, one of the classes of appearances the skeptic follows, he says “we accept being pious as good and being impious as bad *in terms of ordinary life* [*biòtikôs*]” (*PH* 1.24); presumably the contrast is with some theoretical account of the goodness of piety and the badness of its opposite, one confined to philosophers. And it is more explicit in his discussion of signs – that is, observable indications of things that are unobserved – where he declares himself on the side of ordinary life and against philosophical dogmatism (*PH* 2.102, *M* 8.156-8). Some signs are of things not currently observed, but of a kind that have been observed in the past and may be observed in the future (that is, in conjunction with the signs themselves), such as smoke as a sign of fire or a scar as a sign of a previous wound. These he calls “commemorative” signs; they *bring to mind* the things of which they are the signs, although those things are not now observable. And these, he says, both skeptics and ordinary people employ without any suspect intellectual commitments. It is only the kind of sign that purports to discover the underlying nature of things, which cannot ever be directly observed – what he calls the “indicative” sign – that he wishes to oppose; that is an invention of the dogmatists and has no part in our everyday attitudes.
But Sextus does not always identify with the attitudes of ordinary people. Despite having spoken of accepting piety as good “in terms of ordinary life”, he says that ordinary people (*idiótai*, *PH* 1.30) think that certain things are good or bad by nature – a dogmatic position that he studiously avoids. And elsewhere he includes the views of ordinary people among the positions that he places in opposition with a view to suspension of judgment; this is true of the existence and nature of god (*PH* 3.218-19, *M* 9.50) and the existence of motion (*PH* 3.65, *M* 10.45). In the latter case Sextus says that they rely on how things appear; since, as we saw, Sextus also follows appearances for practical purposes, the difference must be that ordinary people take the appearance of motion as showing that there really is such a thing.

The everyday attitudes of a skeptic, then, are not necessarily the same as the attitudes of ordinary non-philosophical people. Sometimes Sextus appears to assimilate the two, but on other occasions he distances himself from the latter. In the case of god, he actually wants to adopt both stances; while attributing to ordinary people the view that there are gods – a view from which he intends to suspend judgment – he also says that in matters of religion he follows ordinary life and “says that there are gods” (*PH* 3.2, *M* 9.49). It is very hard to see how this combination is possible. In any case, Sextus does not consistently represent the unreflective attitudes of ordinary people as in tune with his own everyday attitudes; sometimes he treats them as embodying dogmatic commitments. And so, if one thinks of the attitudes of ordinary people, before being exposed to philosophy, as *natural* attitudes – as I implicitly did in considering modern philosophy – it will follow that Sextus’ own everyday attitudes cannot straightforwardly qualify as natural in that sense, even though he seems to take some trouble to display them as
natural to him. Of course, this will complicate the conception of naturalness, based on modern philosophers’ usage, that I tried to spell out at the beginning, which had to do with the reactions of “any normal person”; for Sextus, it may be that what is unreflectively adopted, or what feels right to adopt upon unpressured reflection, differs from one group to another.

Let me try to sum up this discussion. Those contemporary philosophers who find something natural in the reflections leading to skepticism also hold on to a complex of everyday attitudes that they share with everyone else, which they also take to be natural, and which (with rare exceptions) they take to conflict with skeptical lines of thought. There is thus some sense of a split within human nature, as revealed by these competing (but on this view, equally natural) inclinations; this is articulated most clearly by Thomas Nagel, but seems to be implicit in other philosophers. As a practicing skeptic, Sextus does not have that kind of tension; he takes his skepticism to be quite consistent with a set of everyday attitudes that suffice for the living of a normal life. A good case can be made for saying that he regards these everyday attitudes as natural, at least for himself and those like him. Whether he takes skepticism itself to be natural is less clear; there is reason for thinking that he does take it be natural, at least for those people inclined towards intellectual inquiry, but there is also reason for thinking that he views skepticism as worthwhile and valuable, but not something anyone could be expected to arrive at naturally – perhaps even as a salutary antidote to our natural inclination towards dogmatism. Sextus sends similarly mixed signals on the question whether the skeptic’s own everyday attitudes are also attitudes that he would attribute to ordinary people; sometimes it sounds as if they are, sometimes not. To the extent that he adopts the second
position, it will follow that he regards the everyday attitudes of non-skeptical non-philosophers as incorporating a dogmatic component, and therefore as being at odds with skepticism – whether or not either skepticism or these everyday attitudes qualify as natural.

Finally, we saw that the sense of skepticism as somehow irresistible is often connected in contemporary philosophy with a robust conception of objectivity – the absolute conception of reality, as it has been called; that conception, coupled with the obvious fact that we cannot look at the world except from some perspective, is what makes skepticism seem the only possible outcome. Is there any counterpart to this in the ancient context?

Sextus never mentions anything like the absolute conception of reality; in fact, he never mentions alternative *conceptions* of reality at all. But in effect, I think that his outlook is not so different from this. He finds himself unable to choose among the opposing considerations that he is presented with – or that he has contrived, through his skeptical “ability” – on any given issue. And the reason for this, or one important reason, is that he (like everyone) is a particular person with a particular point of view. This is explicit in the first four of the Ten Modes, which draw attention in various ways to the limitations in individuals’ perspectives. But it is implicit in other aspects of his argumentation, such as when he says that someone’s claims are not to be trusted because that person is a “part of the dispute” (e.g., *PHI* 3.182, *M* 7.318, 351). Now, if one reason why we have no alternative but to suspend judgment is because of the limitations or the partiality in our perspectives, that suggests that it would only be from a perspective that was no perspective – from a “God’s-eye view”, as it is sometimes put – that the truth
about the world would actually be available to us, which is why dogmatism is doomed to failure. And if so, then something like the absolute conception of reality is in the background of Sextus’ skeptical method, even if he does not give it explicit expression. Whether he would say that we – or perhaps just the people “of great nature” who embark on the road leading to skepticism – have a natural aspiration towards this God’s-eye view, as have some contemporary philosophers, is another question. Perhaps these people’s initial ambition to discover the truth could be understood in those terms. But if so, this is apparently something they get over easily enough, once they find that tranquility can be achieved by suspending judgment rather than by discovery. Again, in Sextus’ picture, skepticism does not carry with it any residual anxiety – quite the reverse.

Notes

1 J.L. Mackie, who characterized the claim that “there are no objective values” – an ontological thesis, as he called it (Mackie 1977: 18) – as a form of moral skepticism, is perhaps a partial exception to this trend. But even in his case, the arguments for the claim were in part epistemological: the difficulty of seeing how to settle on one particular moral code as being objectively correct, and the difficulty of understanding what faculty could be capable of discerning objective moral truth.

2 One might say (contrary to the previous paragraph) that this shows ancient skepticism to be epistemological after all; does not an inability to choose between competing positions reflect a failure to know the truth of either? (Thanks to Hannah Ginsborg for pressing this question.) But the point remains that considerations concerning the nature of knowledge, justification, etc. need not play any role in getting us to that state, whereas they are central in modern discussions of skepticism.

3 See the chapter in this volume “Skeptical defenses against the Epicurean and Stoic ‘inaction’ argument.”

4 This is true both of Mackie 1977 and of Sinnott-Armstrong 2006. I have discussed this phenomenon a little further at the opening of Bett 2019.

5 This is a direct riposte to a statement of Quine: “The Humean predicament is the human predicament” (Quine 1969: 72). Quine’s project in that essay was to propose a new kind of epistemology that simply ignored skepticism as Hume conceived it and instead investigated, in the spirit of natural science, how we do in fact acquire knowledge. This might seem to point to an attitude like the one we observed as predominant in Hume himself, where our everyday epistemological practices are the natural ones. But his
acknowledgement of this “human predicament” suggests that (again, as Hume himself occasionally allowed) the reasoning leading to skepticism is also something unavoidable and natural.

6 I emphasized the rarity of Clarke’s position in Bett 1993; this was partly in response to Burnyeat 1997, whose loose talk of the contemporary “insulation” of philosophy from ordinary life made Clarke seem more mainstream than he actually was.

7 See also M 8.203 for the same point, again with a reference to nature.

8 It is true that Sextus restricts his claim to a limited class of people. But in practice I think contemporary philosophers would also restrict their claim to people of a philosophical temperament, or the like – even if they might wish to tone down the elitism implicit in Sextus’ “of great nature”. (See, e.g, Stroud 2011: 3: the metaphysical urge affects “everyone, or at least every reflective person”.)

9 Sextus says that tranquility follows suspension of judgment “fortuitously” (tuchikōs, PH 1.26, 29). But this cannot mean that it is random or unpredictable, since he also says it follows “as a shadow follows a body” (PH 1.29). The point must rather be that it is unexpected the first time, or the first few times, it occurs.

10 For another example, see his opening remarks about number at PH 3.151.

11 Everyday experience is also invoked as a guide to how things really are in the case of place, although here the position is not explicitly attributed to ordinary people as opposed to philosophers (PH 3.120, 135).

12 I have discussed this in detail in Bett 2015a.

13 This seems to me no accident; it is connected with the near-universal assumption in antiquity of what we would regard as a robust form of realism (which would fit the absolute conception of reality quite nicely). I have discussed this in Bett 2015b, which draws on insights first articulated in Burnyeat 1982.