Thinking without Commitment: Two Models
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Abstract

Ancient Greek sceptics suspend judgment about all claims concerning how things really are. The question is what kinds of philosophical thinking that can allow. The paper examines two models of philosophical thinking articulated by Greek sceptics, one by the Pyrrhonist Sextus Empiricus and the other by the Academic Carneades. On Sextus’ model, one lets oneself be passively swayed by the concepts and the habits of reasoning one has acquired (whether innately, through being raised in a certain culture, or through discussion with non-sceptical philosophers). This is a particular case of the general strategy Sextus adopts for living as a sceptic – namely, following the appearances; at no point does he endorse any claim concerning the truth, or the real nature of things. By contrast, Carneades is willing to accept some appearances as persuasive, that is, as having the feel of truth about them; and this feeling of truth can be increased by active investigation. A persuasive appearance is never guaranteed to be true, but the goal is to reach an impression of things that looks as if it is true to the greatest extent possible. One can go along with such impressions, whether in philosophy or in everyday life, without definitely asserting their truth. Finally, there are the question what Sextus himself counts as philosophy, and the question how close he regards his own thinking to that of ordinary people; he seems to be ambivalent on both, but this seems more problematic in the latter case than the former.
Introduction

Philosophical scepticism in the ancient Greco-Roman world centres around suspension of judgment. Two different intellectual traditions are generally considered sceptical, given the importance they accord to this: the Pyrrhonian tradition, claiming inspiration from the obscure figure of Pyrrho of Elis (c.360-270 BCE – though a continuous Pyrrhonian movement does not seem to have started until the first century BCE), and the Academy, the school founded by Plato, from the headship of Arcesilaus (c.268-242 BCE) until its demise as an institution in the early first century BCE. The Pyrrhonists were the ones who (at least in the later phase of the tradition) actually called themselves sceptics. But already in antiquity the Academy, during the period noted, was seen as having enough in common with Pyrrhonism to justify treating them together for many purposes. We have extensive surviving writings from one Pyrrhonist, Sextus Empiricus, who belongs near the end of the tradition (probably around 200 CE). No works survive from the Academics, and in fact neither of the two leading Academic sceptics, Arcesilaus and Carneades, wrote anything at all. But Cicero, who studied at the Academy in its final phase, wrote a good deal about them, especially in his (partially surviving) Academica, and from him and other sources we can piece together a fair amount of information. In what follows I shall concentrate on Sextus and on Carneades (214-129 BCE), probably the greatest Academic sceptic.

The central question for us is simply this: what kind of philosophical thinking is possible for someone who suspends judgment? Both Sextus and Carneades clearly talk a great deal about philosophical topics, and offer arguments that seem designed to lead
to certain conclusions. (Hence, unlike some varieties of thinking explored in other chapters in this volume, the kind of thinking involved here is clearly discursive or propositional.) But how can they do this, consistently with suspension of judgment?

**Sextus Empiricus’ Thinking**

That this is an issue needing to be sorted out is already suggested by the term *skeptikos* itself, which means “inquirer”. At the opening of his best known work, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (hereafter cited as *PH*, the transliterated initials of the title in Greek), Sextus says that, in contrast both to those who think they have discovered the truth and to those who have decided that the truth is undiscoverable¹, the sceptics are still investigating (1.1-3). But for someone who suspends judgment, what can this “investigation” amount to?

Some answers are suggested by Sextus’ succinct explanation of what scepticism is. “The sceptical ability”, he says, “is one that places in opposition things that appear and things that are thought in any way whatsoever, from which, because of the equal strength in the opposing objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment, but after this to tranquility” (*PH* 1.8). Suspension of judgment, then, comes about through the juxtaposition of opposing arguments and impressions that have “equal strength” – that is, that strike the reader or listener as equally convincing. And the sceptics’ “ability” is the ability to assemble – or, in many cases, to devise for themselves – a series of opposing arguments and impressions that will have this characteristic. Though a sceptic may at times argue for certain conclusions, these are always intended to be balanced against considerations that tend in the opposite
direction, leading to suspension of judgment about the topic in question. This certainly involves a lot of intellectual agility and engagement; it also involves keeping an open mind, including even about the possibility that the truth might eventually be discovered – for having closed off that possibility would mean that, at least on one important topic, one was no longer, in fact, suspending judgment. There is therefore some point to Sextus’ claim that the sceptic is “investigating”, but this is not investigation in the sense of an active attempt to discover the truth (as one might initially read him to be saying). The sceptic did start out as someone trying to discover the truth (PH 1.12, 26), but this gets transformed into an ongoing search for materials with which to construct the “oppositions” that will generate suspension of judgment.

Although the reference to tranquility as the outcome of suspension of judgment is a distinctively Pyrrhonian idea (and not one we need explore in this context), much of this account could apply to Carneades as well. But for the moment I will leave Carneades aside and concentrate on Sextus. A number of questions can be raised concerning scepticism as so described. One that dates back to antiquity – indeed, that predates Sextus himself – is, how can you act if you suspend judgment about everything; doesn’t action require making up your mind about certain things (the so-called apraxia or “inactivity” objection)? While this seems to have been meant primarily as a challenge to the possibility of ordinary, everyday behavior, examining Sextus’ answer to it will also start to give some insight into the sceptic’s thinking, including philosophical thinking.

Sextus says that the sceptic’s criterion of action, or way of settling what to do, is the apparent (PH 1.21). Whether or not things really are the way they appear is another
question, on which the sceptic will not take a stand. But that things appear a certain way is not up for discussion, and this can serve as a guide for how to act on any given occasion. Sextus implies that there is nothing unusual in this, when he says that the sceptic lives by following the apparent “according to the observance of life” (PH 1.23) – that is, according to the way people generally react to the conditions in which they find themselves. Whether he thinks ordinary people, like the sceptics themselves, are free from any commitments concerning the real nature of things is another question. But at least as far as the business of daily life is concerned, it probably makes little difference, and in any case the way things appear is enough for the sceptic to act in very much the same way as people normally act.

More specifically, Sextus draws attention to four broad categories of appearances that are particularly salient in shaping the sceptic’s decisions and actions. The first of these is the “guidance of nature”, about which he simply says, “By natural guidance we are naturally such as to perceive and to think” (PH 1.23-4). A great many of the ways things appear, then, are simply products of our perceptual and cognitive makeup. Given how our sense-organs are constructed, we will see things as red or green, hear things as shrill, etc. And something similar applies, it is suggested, when it comes to thinking: given how our minds are constructed, we will engage in certain characteristic thought-patterns in light of the circumstances we are faced with. This story certainly needs some filling out, and again, the focus seems to be on the everyday thinking shared by all of us, rather than on philosophical thinking. But at least we have the beginnings of a picture of how, on Sextus’ picture, thinking is possible for a sceptic.
More light is shed on this matter when Sextus addresses an objection posed to the sceptics by their opponents the dogmatists – that is, philosophers who do have theories or doctrines; and here the issue does pertain specifically to philosophical thinking. The objection, in its most general form, is that “the sceptic cannot either investigate or think about the things they [i.e., the dogmatists themselves] hold doctrines about” (PH 2.1). The reason is that the sceptic must either grasp the things the dogmatists are talking about, or not. If they do not grasp them, they are obviously not in a position to discuss them. But if they do grasp them, then they have conceded the reality of these things, and so there is no room for scepticism about them (PH 2.2-3).

Sextus’ reply is, what do you mean by “grasp” (or “apprehend”, katalambanein)? If “grasping” something does include affirming the reality of that thing (and is also required in order even to discuss something), then no one could dispute the views of people who believe in things they themselves do not, or, for that matter, inquire into things they themselves do not yet have firm views about; and these consequences would obviously be just as problematic for a dogmatist as for a sceptic (PH 2.4-9). If, on the other hand, “grasping” means just “thinking about”, without necessarily believing that the things thought about are real, then the sceptic is no worse off than anyone else.

“Thinking about” something, in this sense, can include understanding some complicated conceptual connections. If one is discussing dogmatic theories, one must of course understand what the dogmatists are talking about. The Epicureans, for example, have a precise conception of what an atom is: it is an indivisible particle having size, shape and weight, and no other intrinsic properties. And the Stoics have a precise
conception of “apprehension” (katalēpsis): to apprehend something is to assent to an apprehensive appearance, which is an appearance that (given a much-discussed three-part definition, the nuances of which we need not get into⁴) could not be false. In order to discuss these topics, the sceptic must of course grasp the dogmatists’ conceptions of them, in the sense of knowing what the dogmatists mean when they say “atom” or “apprehension”. But it does not follow that the sceptic must take on board these conceptions in the sense of accepting the necessary and sufficient conditions posited by the dogmatists for the existence of these things, let alone accepting that they do indeed exist.

Sextus’ actual wording in this context is worth some attention. He says, “The sceptic is not, I think, prohibited from conceiving [noēseôs], which comes about by reason⁵ from the things that strike passively [pathêtikôs] and appear to him plainly, and do not at all bring in the reality of the things conceived” (PH 2.10). Thinking, for the sceptic, is above all something passive. In the philosophical context, one notices the concepts the dogmatists employ, including the conceptual connections internal to them, but one does not in any way endorse them; one thinks of them simply as what the Epicureans call atoms, or what the Stoics call apprehension – convenient for use in debate with them, and perhaps for other purposes too, but not to be regarded as embodying any insight into the things’ real nature. And one’s acquisition and use of everyday concepts will be of the same passive character. Concepts will form in one’s head as one grows up, and perhaps new concepts will come along when one is an adult and already a sceptic; these too can be adopted as useful ways of classifying things,
without at any point being seen as the only way, or the correct way. They are the way the people in one’s environment divide things up – and, for all one knows, some of them may even be products of one’s nature as a human being; that is good enough to make them suitable for conversing with one’s neighbours. All of this can be called a use of reason (logos), as Sextus does in the passage I just quoted; both when one is debating with the dogmatists, and when one is thinking about (for example) what to do tomorrow, one is employing the reasoning powers that one was born with and/or was acculturated into. Non-sceptical philosophers may have more elevated conceptions of reason and what it can achieve. But the term need not be surrendered to them; sceptics, with their more limited ambitions, can be said to reason too, as can those who do not think about philosophy at all⁶.

This takes us back to the passage about following the appearances. This too is described as occurring passively (PH 1.22), and we can now see more clearly what Sextus has in mind here, particularly as applied to thinking. One of the four major categories of appearances is the laws and customs of one’s society (PH 1.23-4). While Sextus does not say so, there could very well be a linguistic or conceptual dimension to this; certain ways of thinking are standardly inculcated in one society, but not in another. But, as we saw, where Sextus does explicitly place thinking in his taxonomy of appearances is under the heading “guidance of nature”. He does not, of course, have any theory of human nature in mind in saying this. But his thought seems to be that, at least at the most basic level, the way we think, like the way we perceive with the senses, is a function of how we are as human beings. This will include our use of concepts that
do not seem to be culturally specific, which the sceptic can use along with everyone else, albeit in the passive way we have noted. But it also no doubt includes certain habits of inference: for example, accepting both poles of a contradiction would rub us the wrong way, whereas accepting $Q$, when presented with $P$ and “If $P$ then $Q$”, or expecting the sun to rise tomorrow given that it has always done so before, feels natural. That we think in these ways is just how we are built; it does not need justification, and indeed, Sextus later casts doubt on both deduction and induction, understood as ways of penetrating to how things really are ($PH$ 2.193-204). That is no reason not to follow these ways of thinking – again, passively, and without taking a stand on whether they fit reality.

It will be seen that, on this picture, there is no fundamental difference between the sceptic’s philosophical thinking and the sceptic’s thinking in ordinary life. I have looked at two passages of Sextus, one addressing an objection concerning the sceptic’s philosophical thinking, the other primarily focused on how the sceptic’s mind works in everyday life. But the picture of thinking that one gets from each is essentially the same. There will be concepts, vocabulary and topics peculiar to the philosophical context, and the reasoning involved in discussing these will no doubt be more complex and elaborate than in everyday contexts of deliberation. But the sceptic’s basic attitude will be the same whether in philosophical debate or considering what to buy at the supermarket. One follows the reasoning tendencies and the preferences that one finds within one, be they natural or cultural in origin, going along with the way things strike one, without any commitment one way or the other as to whether this tracks the truth. This passive
acceptance, for practical purposes, of how things appear may seem at odds with Sextus’ very energetic argumentation in the course of his scrutiny of dogmatic theories. But Sextus will insist that he simply follows whatever trains of thought appear to him at the time most useful for generating the situation of “equal strength” \((\textit{isostheneia}, \textit{PH} 1.8)\) among the opposing positions he is assembling with a view to suspension of judgment – this “equal strength” itself being simply a matter of the relative psychological force with which these different positions strike the sceptic, or the audience, on that occasion. It is the same even when he is explaining the sceptical outlook itself. Very early in book 1 of \textit{Outlines of Pyrrhonism}, which gives a general overview of Pyrrhonist scepticism, he says “that on none of the things to be talked about are we positive that they are absolutely as we say, but we report on each one like a case-study\(^7\), according to how it then appears to us” \((\textit{PH} 1.4)\). He reinforces the point at the end of his account of the sceptic’s reliance on the appearances, adding “And we say all this undogmatically” \((\textit{PH} 1.24)\).

Again, as regards everyday thinking, there is a question how close this persistently non-committal attitude is to the thinking of ordinary people, and what Sextus’ own take on this question is. I shall return to this in closing. For now, I sum up this section by reiterating that Sextus has proposed to us a model of thinking that allows complicated exercises of rationality, but that refuses to take any position on the truth of how things appear, either in philosophical or in everyday contexts. This is what will turn out to be the crucial difference between Sextus’ model of sceptical thinking and that of Carneades, to whom I now turn.

\textbf{Carneades’ Thinking}
The reports on Carneades do not speak explicitly of suspension of judgment. But they do speak of something that, for our purposes, amounts to the same thing. Carneades, we are told, was forthright in his opposition to assent – that is, to definitely declaring something as true. Cicero, passing on what was said about Carneades by his successor Clitomachus, who wrote a great many books about him, speaks of Carneades as banishing assent from our minds as if driving out “a wild and savage monster”, and compares this achievement to a labour of Hercules (Acad. 2.108). Of course, the opposition to assent only makes sense on the assumption that one does not in fact have knowledge. But that is taken for granted in the context of the sceptical Academy, and hence assent is here spoken of in the same breath as “opinion and rashness”, where “opinion” refers to assent to an impression that is not “apprehensive”, in the Stoic sense noted earlier – that is, not guaranteed to be correct.

Carneades, then, is reported as suspending judgment, and this looks much like the attitude of Sextus. Yet there are also reports of Carneades holding views, including philosophical views. One of the most striking has to do with this very notion of apprehension. The Stoic Antipater is said to have objected against the Academics that if they are going to assert that nothing can be apprehended, they should at least claim to apprehend that. But Carneades, representing the Academic position, is reported as replying that, on the contrary, this would be hopelessly inconsistent; if nothing can be apprehended, that very fact cannot be apprehended either (Acad. 2.28). Carneades thus avoids claiming to have apprehended anything, and this at least is consistent with the avoidance of assent discussed in the previous paragraph. What he notably does not do,
however, is reject the attribution to himself of the claim that nothing can be apprehended. And the same claim is attributed to Carneades (and to other Academics) by Sextus (*PH* 1.3, 226). So it looks as if Carneades thought it was possible to *hold* philosophical views without *assenting* to them, and hence without deviating from suspension of judgment. How could this be?

Part of the answer undoubtedly involves Carneades’ elaborate account of the “persuasive appearance” (*pithanê phantasia*) and how it can serve as a basis for choice and action. Sextus reports on this in some detail in his *Against the Logicians*, and there are also frequent references to it in Cicero. It is clearly designed as a response to the same *apraxia* or “inactivity” objection that confronted Sextus, and the basic idea is that one can follow appearances that are persuasive without committing oneself to their truth.

According to Sextus’ summary of Carneades, a persuasive appearance is an appearance that feels (quite a bit) as if it is true. Objectively speaking, appearances are either true or false. But to the person experiencing them, they can come across as true whether or not they actually are true (or as false even though they may be true). A persuasive appearance is one that comes across as true to a considerable degree; and among those that rise above that threshold, there is room for further variations in degrees of persuasiveness. Of course, persuasiveness is not a guarantee of truth. But the fact that persuasive appearances occasionally lead us astray is no reason not to use them to guide our decisions and actions; most of the time they do not do so – and that is the best that could be said about any method for deciding what to do (Sextus, *M*
This may seem to introduce an objective judgment: the appearance feels as if it is true, and mostly that turns out to be correct. But it is not hard to construe this in sceptical terms – that is, in terms of the consistency of the original appearance with other subsequent appearances\(^8\).

Nor do we have to rest content with the persuasive appearances that just, as it were, happen to us. It is possible to increase the level of persuasiveness by further research; and again, consistency among multiple appearances is one key factor in this. If the original persuasive appearance turns out to be consistent with many other appearances bearing upon the same subject, then it becomes all the more persuasive – and here too there are differences of degree (M 7.176-81). Sextus uses the analogy of a doctor judging by multiple symptoms, rather than by just one, that a patient has a fever. In addition, one can actively check the reliability of any given appearance, seeing whether there are any factors that might put it into question; if not, its persuasiveness is greater still (M 7.181-3)\(^9\). At no point do we reach any kind of guarantee of truth. But we can take active steps to make the way things appear to us convey as strong an impression of truth as possible. Again, as with Sextus’ account of the sceptic’s use of appearances, this account of the persuasive appearance seems primarily designed to explain how the decisions and actions of ordinary life are possible if one suspends judgment. But here too, there is no reason why it could not also be used to explain how thinking, including philosophical thinking, is possible. A line of abstract argument can appear persuasive just as much as a mundane sensory impression.
An important difference between Sextus and Carneades is, however, now in view. Whereas Sextus carefully avoided any mention of truth in his description of how the sceptic followed appearances – one simply lets the appearances nudge one in one direction or another – Carneades very deliberately constructs his account in terms of an orientation towards the truth\(^{10}\). A persuasive appearance feels as if it is true; that is what makes it a good guide for decision and action. And the more that feeling can be increased, by the kinds of measures just mentioned, the better – at least, if the circumstances allow and the matter is important enough to be worth the trouble (\(M\ 7.184-9\)).

Now, at this point one may wonder how this is consistent with Carneades’ reported opposition to assent. If one acts on a persuasive appearance, has one not in fact decided that it is true, rather than simply feeling as if it is true? Carneades’ Stoic opponents would certainly say so. We are told that according to both Chrysippus and Antipater – Stoics who were, respectively, earlier than Carneades and his younger contemporary – it is simply nonsense to say, as the Academics did, that action on the basis of a certain appearance is possible without assenting to it (Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions* 1057A). Yet Cicero, speaking on behalf of the Academics, says that, while aiming to get as close to the truth as possible, “we hold many things as persuasive, which we can easily follow but scarcely affirm” – by contrast with their dogmatic opponents, who have no doubt that the things they maintain are true (*Acad. 2.7-8*, cf. 2.66). Though Cicero does not mention Carneades by name here, it seems clear, if we
bear in mind everything we have seen attributed to him so far, that he too would have
needed some such combination of ideas.

Here we must examine another important passage of Cicero, which does refer
specifically to Carneades – or rather, to Clitomachus explaining Carneades (Acad. 2.102
– note “in almost these words”, his fere verbis; though this cannot be literally true, since
Clitomachus wrote in Greek, not Latin, Cicero is clearly trying to be as faithful and
precise as possible). Clitomachus, as transmitted by Cicero, says the following:

The wise person is said to withhold assent in two ways: in one way, when this is
understood – that he doesn’t entirely assent to anything\(^{11}\) – in another, when he
checks himself from responding so as to approve or disapprove of something, so
that he neither denies nor affirms anything; and that since this is so, he accepts
the former [kind of withholding of assent], so that he never assents, but holds on
to the latter [kind of assent], so that, following probability\(^{12}\), whenever this is
present or is lacking, he can respond either yes or no. And indeed, since the
person who on all matters restrains himself from assenting nonetheless does
favour moving and doing something, there remain impressions of the kind by
which we can be excited to action, as well as things we answer on either side
when questioned, merely by following what appears that way, so long as it’s
without assent; however, not all impressions of that kind are approved, but the
ones that are not impeded by anything (Acad. 2.104).

While some of the details are less clear than they might be – hence the need for
my insertions – the basic idea is clear enough: there is a kind of assent that is to be
rigorously avoided, and another kind that is permitted to the Academic sceptic. Once
the two kinds have been introduced, the term “assent” is reserved for the stronger kind
that the sceptic avoids; and this makes sense, since this must be the kind of assent that
Carneades is elsewhere credited with eliminating. But the weaker kind, also referred to
as “approval” or “following”, is nonetheless sufficient for action and also for discussion
(note the reference to answering questions). And the impressions or appearances that
one “approves” in this way will be the persuasive ones; the closing reference to
impressions that “are not impeded by anything” surely harks back to the process of
testing persuasive appearances for mutual consistency – Sextus calls those that pass this
test “unimpeded” (aperispastos, M 7.176).

There is still room for clarification as to what this distinction amounts to.
Persuasive appearances, to recall, are those that strike one as true, or, to put it another
way, that one regards as likely to be true. And the point must be that thinking of
something as likely to be true is different from definitely committing oneself to its truth.
The latter would be full-scale assent, which Carneades eschews. But thinking that
something is likely is enough to stir one to action or to a particular response in a debate.
So, as I said, Carneades has an orientation towards the truth – he cares about making his
impressions of the world as likely as possible – but he nonetheless withholds final
judgment on their truth. Since no amount of persuasiveness is a guarantee of truth,
such a judgment, or assent of the full-scale variety, is never in order if one wants to
avoid “opinion and rashness”. Instead, the thing to do is to go along with, or “approve”,

what seems likely; in doing so, one commits oneself to no more than what looks as if it is true – never to what actually is true.

One result of all this is that for Carneades, as for Sextus, philosophical thinking and everyday thinking are understood in essentially the same way. To repeat, the passage on assent versus “approval” specifically mentions answering questions as one domain in which this distinction applies, and the questions could just as well be philosophical as quotidian; one can “approve” a philosophical position without assenting to it in the full-scale fashion, just as one can “approve” the impression that it is a sunny day, or that a trip to the beach would be fun. Now, as we saw, Cicero presents Carneades as making the claim that nothing can be apprehended, while also insisting that this itself was not apprehended (by himself or anyone else) (Acad. 2.28). We can now see how that could have worked: he can “approve” the view that nothing can be apprehended without claiming to have apprehended it – or, in other words, without giving it full-scale assent. We can also see that, when Sextus differentiates himself from Carneades by saying that the latter asserts that nothing can be apprehended (PH 1.1-3), he is oversimplifying. Carneades does indeed say, in his own person, that nothing can be apprehended. But it is not something he assents to; it is merely something he finds persuasive, or thinks likely, and hence “approves”. The difference between them is real, but it is not as stark as Sextus makes out.

As noted at the outset, Carneades talked about a great many philosophical topics: we have numerous reports of arguments he advanced in all three of the major philosophical areas recognised in his time: logic, physics, and ethics. I do not suggest
that in all these cases he held views of his own, in this non-committal fashion. It is clear that much of his philosophical activity was critical, directed to undermining the theories of his dogmatist opponents and producing a state of suspension of judgment about these theories. But there is no need to suppose that this is all he was interested in doing. This “purely dialectical” interpretation has enjoyed some support in recent decades\textsuperscript{13}. But if one takes seriously the idea that one can “approve” positions without assenting to them – as Carneades clearly did, whatever one thinks of the success of this move – then there is no reason to recoil from attributing views to him.

We have seen that the view that nothing can be apprehended looks very much like a view held by Carneades. Which of the other things he said may have represented views of his own is less clear. Clitomachus is reported to have said that he could never get clear on what Carneades’ own views were (Cicero, \textit{Acad.} 2.139). Of course, if the purely dialectical interpretation was correct, Carneades would have held (or at any rate, expressed) no views at all, and Clitomachus, his closest associate, would presumably have known this. So this report suggests that he did have at least some views. It also suggests that Carneades did not go out of his way to clarify which these were. However, the two accounts on which we have concentrated in this section – Carneades’ account of the persuasive impression, and his account of the difference between assent and approval – look like good candidates for being his own views. They are clearly intended to show how choice and action (including, again, the speech acts that figure in philosophical debate) are possible without assent – a point on which we know that he was pressed by his opponents. If they succeed, there is no reason for him not to adopt
them himself – the accounts can be applied to themselves, showing how they can be accepted without being assented to – and very good reason for him to do so, given the argumentative context.

**Sextus’ Thinking versus Other People’s Thinking (Philosophical or Otherwise)**

I have concentrated on how Sextus and Carneades characterise their own thinking, both in philosophical and in everyday contexts (since in neither case is there a rigid divide between the two). But in Sextus’ case¹⁴, there are further issues concerning how he conceives the thinking of others – both the thinking of non-sceptical philosophers and the thinking of ordinary people who are not philosophers (whether sceptical or dogmatic) – and whether or how these differ from his own thinking. In this final section I take up these issues.

There is a curious ambivalence in Sextus about whether to count scepticism as a philosophy. In the opening sentences of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, where, as we saw, he distinguishes scepticism from the claim to have discovered the truth and the claim that it cannot be discovered, he refers to these three orientations as “the highest-level [i.e., most general] philosophies” (*PH* 1.4, cf.1.2). And shortly afterwards, introducing his plan for the work, he says that there is both a general and a specific account “of the sceptical philosophy” (*PH* 1.5), and then lists, among the topics to be considered under the general heading, the distinguishing of scepticism “from the neighbouring philosophies”, which certainly implies, even if it does not actually state, that scepticism is a philosophy. However, Sextus immediately goes on to say that the specific account is where the sceptics “argue against each part of what is called philosophy” (*PH* 1.6), which seems to
express a rather different attitude. And this phrase “what is called philosophy” (hê kaloumenê philosophia or hê legomenê philosophia) occurs in numerous other places, especially in programmatic contexts. Often, as in the case just cited, the topic is one or more of the three parts of philosophy as the subject was standardly divided – logic, physics, and ethics (PH 1.18, 2.205. 3.1). Sometimes the “called” (or perhaps we should say, “so-called”) is applied to the parts themselves (PH 3.167); and at the end of the work, summing up his treatment of ethics, he even combines the two, speaking of “what is referred to as [tôi legomenôi] the ethical part of what is called [tês kaloumenês] philosophy” (PH 3.278).

The idea behind this phrasing seems to be that the enterprise generally conducted under the heading “philosophy” has something suspect or bogus about it. It also implies, of course, that the sceptic wants nothing to do with this enterprise. The suspect element, I take it, is the pretension, on occasion at any rate, to have discovered the truth, or at least the optimistic expectation that this will sometimes happen. Speaking of the transition the sceptic has undergone from someone who hoped to discover the truth to someone who suspends judgment (in other words, from pre-sceptic to actual sceptic), Sextus characterises this person as “having begun to philosophise with a view to making a judgment on the appearances and apprehending which are true and which false” (PH 1.26); this is clearly what he thinks non-sceptical philosophers are still aiming to do, and the confident aspiration to achieve this is presumably what he takes to be embodied in the term “philosophy” as normally used. For a word whose etymology is “love of wisdom”, this is perhaps not unreasonable. Yet
despite his obvious distancing of himself from philosophy so understood, he does not abandon the use of the term “philosophy” for his own outlook once the phrase “so-called philosophy” has been introduced. Having given his brief introduction to the sceptical “ability”, which we looked at earlier, he says that the “Pyrrhonian philosopher” is one who has that ability (PH 1.11). And in the passage where he addresses the challenge from the dogmatists as to how a sceptic can even discuss their theories, he again speaks of “the sceptical philosophy” (PH 2.6 – also “the suspensive philosophy”, 2.9); yet immediately before and after this discussion, he also refers to the parts of “what is called philosophy” (PH 2.1, 12).

Of course, one possible explanation of this would be that Sextus thinks scepticism is a truer form of philosophy than the varieties of thought typically known by that term; someone who thought this might indeed refer to scepticism without qualification as “philosophy” and the others as “so-called philosophy”\(^\text{16}\). But there are at least two reasons why I think this is unlikely. First, Sextus gives absolutely no hint that he takes the term as applied to scepticism to be more appropriate than as applied to the other ways of thinking usually called philosophy. He repeatedly refers to the latter as “so-called philosophy”, but he never specifies something else that qualifies as \textit{bona fide} philosophy. Moreover, when he does use the term “philosophy” to apply to scepticism, phrases such as “the sceptical philosophy” strongly suggest that there are other forms of thinking that could equally well be called philosophy; here, too, there is simply no contrast drawn that would limit the appropriate use of the term to scepticism. Second, to hold this kind of view would require that one had some kind of general conception of
what it would take for a form of thinking to be legitimately termed a philosophy; and this does not sound at all like Sextus, both because it would saddle him with a positive doctrine, and because he explicitly says that the sceptic does not make a fuss about correct or incorrect uses of language (PH 1.207).

But if we do not accept this attempted resolution of the issue, it follows that Sextus is inconsistent in his use of the term “philosophy”. Sometimes he applies it neutrally to scepticism and to dogmatic philosophies, while at other times he applies it pejoratively to dogmatic philosophies, with the clear implication that they do not live up to their pretentions in claiming the term, and that he himself wants nothing to do with philosophy so understood – but without offering any contrasting conception of philosophy that he would claim for himself. And since these distinct usages occur several times in very close proximity to one another, we can hardly doubt that he knows what he is doing17. So what is that?

Clearly any answer can only be guesswork. But I would like to suggest that Sextus is deliberately inviting us to reflect on what philosophical thinking is or could be. What is normally called philosophical thinking is an attempt to penetrate to the truth about the world, an attempt claimed by its proponents to have some success; in this usual understanding of the term, Sextus would not want to call himself a philosopher, and indeed he regards philosophy so understood as something of a sham. The kind of thinking in which he himself engages, when confronting the theories of these “philosophers” who do not live up to their billing – the thinking that we discussed in the earlier section on Sextus – will then be something other than philosophical thinking. But
then, one might say that, in Sextus’ view, the thinking of his opponents will not truly be philosophical thinking either, precisely because it fails to live up to what is claimed for it; if one follows out the implications of the term “so-called philosophy” far enough, there will simply be no such thing as genuine philosophical thinking. On the other hand, on a more relaxed usage, sceptical thinking as we saw it in the earlier section will qualify as philosophical – and so will the thinking of his opponents; philosophical thinking will be any kind of thinking that addresses certain characteristic topics, and the thinking of sceptics and of dogmatists will qualify equally well. By juxtaposing these two different usages, Sextus is perhaps engaging in a kind of meta-level instance of his usual method of opposition, giving us two conflicting conceptions of philosophy, each having something to be said for it. Perhaps he is even pushing us to suspend judgment about what philosophy is and whether scepticism is a philosophy. At any rate, he is pushing us to consider that question.

Finally, there is an issue that I have postponed concerning the relation between the thinking of the sceptic, whether in philosophical or in ordinary contexts, and the thinking of ordinary people. Here too Sextus seems to show ambivalence, and in this case I am not sure we can avoid seeing the inconsistency as a problem. As we saw, his account of how the sceptic acts by following the appearances seems to go out of its way to make the sceptic’s everyday activities look like those of the average person; and this may give the impression that he takes the average person’s attitudes not to involve anything that would conflict with his own sceptical suspension of judgment. But this is not the case. In the very next chapter of Outlines of Pyrrhonism, where he talks about
the sceptic’s aim in life (PH 1.25-30), he singles out the main reason for the sceptic’s tranquility: it is the fact that the sceptic lacks any beliefs to the effect that certain things are really, in their true nature, good or bad. For this reason, he suggests, the sceptic is better off than other people. And among these “other people” are not just dogmatic philosophers, for whom a belief in things that are really good and bad would be a central aspect of their ethical thinking, but also ordinary people (idiôtai, PH 1.30). At least on this subject, then, Sextus attributes to the average person a set of beliefs about how things really are, beliefs from which he very explicitly separates himself.

This apparently two-sided approach is replicated in other places. When he discusses signs – that is, means for inferring from something observed to something unobserved – Sextus distinguishes between signs as employed in common life and signs as employed by dogmatic philosophers. The former, which he calls commemorative signs, are observed phenomena that allow one to infer to something else currently unobserved, because in the past the two types of thing have frequently been observed together – for example, smoke as a sign of fire, when one’s view of the fire happens to be blocked; one’s memory of the regular correlation of smoke and fire leads one to think “fire” as soon as one sees smoke. By contrast, the signs the dogmatists employ – or claim to employ – are observed phenomena that supposedly allow inferences about things that can never be observed, such as the atomic structure of matter; these Sextus calls “indicative signs”. Now, Sextus does not accept indicative signs, and offers numerous arguments against their existence to balance those of their proponents. But he has no problem with commemorative signs, saying that they are common in
everyday life, and declaring that on this topic the sceptics actually take the side of ordinary life by agreeing with its methods and rejecting only the kind of sign dreamed up by the dogmatists (PH 2.97-102, M 8.151-8).

Here, then, is another case where Sextus seems to emphasise that the average person’s attitudes are akin to his own. A further such case is religion, where he says that the sceptics “following ordinary life without opinions, say that there are gods and worship the gods and say that they have foreknowledge”, and oppose only dogmatic theories about the divine (PH 3.2, cf. M 9.49). But here things begin to get more complicated. For when Sextus moves to consider the real existence of god, and to suspend judgment about it, he includes among the views placed in opposition (about which judgment is therefore to be suspended) not only dogmatic theories, but also the views of ordinary people (M 9.50, PH 3.218-19). So now it sounds as if ordinary religion is not just a matter of practices one can engage in without endorsing any doctrines; rather, ordinary people hold the definite belief that there are gods, which is a belief about how things really are. And in this case, Sextus cannot pretend both to be a sceptic and to be religious in the way ordinary people are religious. In one work, Against the Physicists, he says both of these things about ordinary religion very close together, as if there was no conflict between them (M 9.49, 50); but it is hard to see how he can have it both ways. Another case where he includes an ordinary opinion among the opposing views on which to suspend judgment is motion. Some people say that there is motion, some say that there is not, and some suspend judgment about it. The sceptics are of course in the last category. But the attitude of ordinary life is placed in the first category
(PH 3.65, M 10.45). Sextus does say that ordinary people rely on the appearances in making this judgment (M 10.45, cf. PH 3.66), and he too, as we have seen, relies on appearances. But since the ordinary judgment about motion is placed among the opposing positions on which judgment is suspended, it cannot be a mere following of opinion like the sceptic’s own; it must instead be the definite view that motion really is part of the nature of things.

So it looks as if Sextus’ own everyday attitudes are not entirely the same as the attitudes he takes ordinary people to hold. On some subjects he attributes to ordinary people, implicitly or explicitly, opinions that we could call reflective or quasi-theoretical; even ordinary people, then, take on board a little of the kind of philosophical thinking that we have seen he studiously avoids, and stigmatises with the phrase “so-called philosophy”. While he periodically strikes the pose of being sympathetic to the average person and only opposed to the highfalutin philosophizing of the dogmatists, he does not stick with it consistently. There would be nothing wrong with this if he were simply to admit that even ordinary people are sometimes drawn towards speculation about the real nature of things, and that, to that extent, his own thinking (whether on philosophical topics or not) stands apart both from that of ordinary people and from that of dogmatic philosophers. But he never says anything along these lines, and one might wish that he had been clearer on the matter – both in his own head and in communicating with the reader. Again, the hardest case here is probably religion: if he going to place ordinary people, as he does, alongside dogmatic philosophers in their
belief in gods, he is just not plausible when he says that he is religious in the same way as the ordinary person.

Notes

1 Under this heading Sextus includes Carneades. As we shall see, this is not without merit, although it omits a crucial point.

2 This reading of Sextus is not uncontroversial. Casey Perin, in particular, has argued that Sextus is indeed an inquirer in the expected sense of someone trying to discover the truth; see Perin 2010. I have argued against this kind of reading in several essays in Bett 2019, although I am no longer as critical of Sextus’ self-description as inquirer as in some of those essays. A fine recent treatment of the topic is Castagnoli 2018.

3 Sextus elsewhere raises essentially the same issue concerning the specific topic of demonstration, attributing the objection to the Epicureans (M 8.337-336a); but his response here is less satisfactory. I have discussed this in Bett forthcoming a, section 4.

4 A good recent discussion of this is Stojanovic 2019.

5 I read logôi, following most editors; Annas and Barnes 1994/2000 omit this word from their translation. I have discussed this in more detail in Bett forthcoming a, n.33.

6 Dogmatic versus sceptical conceptions of reason are well discussed in Tsouna 2019. The only major point on which I would take issue with Tsouna is that, on her reading, Sextus also adopts a second conception of reason that is closer to the dogmatic one; this seems to me unnecessary.
Historikós, an adverb from the noun historia, which (among other things) can mean a medical report of observed symptoms; the term is so used especially by the Empiricist school of medicine, with which Sextus Empiricus was of course associated. (See Galen, On the Sects for Beginners, chapter 2, conveniently accessible in English in Frede 1985, where historia is translated “history”.)

For this reason Carneades has sometimes been thought of as a kind of coherentist.

Sextus’ briefer account of these matters in Outlines of Pyrrhonism reverses the order of these two higher levels of persuasiveness: first checking, then looking at consistency. But since there will surely be considerable overlap between these two, not much turns on this. For discussion see Allen 1994.

In Bett 1990 I argued for a reading of Carneades similar to what I have here attributed to Sextus. This now seems to me not to have given enough attention to the connection (both in Sextus’ summary of Carneades and as a conceptual matter) between persuasiveness and truth. On this see Thorsrud 2010, Thorsrud 2018. However, I think I am still at odds with Thorsrud in that I see Carneades as restricting himself to subjective impressions of truth, rather than any kind of objective judgment that something is true. On this, see further Bett forthcoming b.

These words could also be translated “that he doesn’t assent to anything at all”.

Either way, the point is that one will refrain from assent of the strong kind, by comparison with the other kind that is about to be introduced. For more detailed discussion, see Bett forthcoming b, section III.
Probabilitatem; probabilis is Cicero’s translation of pithanos, which I have rendered as “persuasive”.

An important impetus for this was Couissin 1929, made widely available to Anglophone readers in the influential Burnyeat 1983. Sedley 1983, in the same volume, also supports it.

Nothing comparable is recorded for Carneades.

Elsewhere Sextus speaks of “all the philosophical schools and scepticism”, as if scepticism is not a philosophical school (PH 1.185). The emphasis here may be on “school” (hairesis) more than on “philosophical”. But since Sextus also says that, if by “school” you mean a set of doctrines about the underlying nature of things, the sceptic does not belong to a school (PH 1.16), his point here will amount to essentially the same thing.

Annas and Barnes 1994/2000 use the translation “what they call philosophy”; whether or not they intended it, this could be understood to imply such a reading (with “what they call philosophy” being contrasted with something else that Sextus himself calls philosophy). However, there is no “they” in the Greek.

What I have been saying in this section applies almost exclusively to Outlines of Pyrrhonism. Sextus’ other works do not exhibit this phenomenon to anything like the same extent. On this, see Bett 2013, section IV.

Today the distinction between what is or can be observed, and what is not or cannot, is of course much less clear than Sextus assumes. Are the results obtained at the Large Hadron Collider, for example, observations or inferences? But in an era of primitive
technology and very limited grasp of experimental techniques, the idea that we can sharply distinguish between what can (in the right circumstances) be observed, and what is permanently and by nature unobservable, must have seemed much more obvious.

19 I have discussed this in detail in Bett 2015. Marchand 2016 is an interesting defense of Sextus, attributing to him a pragmatic attitude towards religious discourse while accepting that ordinary people may well have religious beliefs that go beyond this. I do not see how this avoids Sextus being disingenuous when he claims to be “following ordinary life” concerning religion. However, we agree on my main point in this context: that Sextus does not take his own attitudes to be fully in line with those of ordinary people.

20 Why not say that this is a case where Sextus is going “meta” and inviting the reader to ponder the question – as I did in the case of scepticism and philosophy? Because the question at issue here is simply whether people have the definite belief that there really are gods; and what people believe is not the kind of issue on which he applies the method of opposition – indeed, he seems in general to treat this as easy to answer, presumably at the level of appearances. By contrast, the question what counts as a philosophy clearly belongs in the theoretical domain and admits of opposing views.