

Greek Skepticism: Sextus Empiricus

Merlin CCC – 7 November 2020

David Nowakowski
consulting.philosopher@gmail.com
<https://davidnowakowski.net>

People, Books, and Terms

- Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360–c. 270 BCE) → Pyrrhonism.
- Arcesilaus (c. 315–240 BCE) → the “Skeptical Academy.”
- Sextus Empiricus (2nd/3rd cent. CE).
 - *The Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. (abbreviation: *PH*).
 - Book I: Skepticism and its methods.
 - Book II: Applications: Logic.
 - Book III: Applications: Physics and ethics.
 - *Against the Mathematicians*.
- Skeptics (and sceptics) and dogmatists.

What is Skepticism?

- “Skepticism is an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability by which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgement and afterward to tranquility.” (*PH*, I.8)
 - An ability.
 - Things which appear; things which are thought of.
 - Equipollence.
 - Suspension of judgement.
 - Tranquility (*ataraxia*).
- How does suspension “follow”? Logically, or chronologically?
- Beliefs (*dogma*) vs. appearances.

Examples

- “Honey is sweet” (*PH*, I.92).
- Mirrors and tricks of light (*PH*, I.48).
 - The trial of Galileo.
- The (moral) status of dogs (*PH*, I.62–72).
- Comets (*PH*, I.141).
 - Colonizing outer space?

Sextus' Four (Types of) Exceptions

- “We live in accordance with everyday appearances, without holding opinions — for we are not able to be totally inactive.” (*PH*, I.23)
- 1. Guidance by nature → perceiving and thinking. (Descartes?)
- 2. Necessitation by feelings (*pathē*) → hunger leads to food, thirst leads to drink.
- 3. Handing down of customs and laws → accept (from an everyday point-of-view) that piety is good, and impiety is bad.
- 4. Teaching of expertise → activity in crafts (including medicine!).

Concluding Reflections

- “Negative dogmatism”?
- Approaches and invitations:
 - Ethical.
 - Epistemic.
 - Fallibilism.
- Continuing the search for truth? For wisdom?



Appendix: The Skeptic's "Modes"

- The modes are types/categories of arguments. When faced with a dogmatist's argument, the skeptic first identifies the type, then constructs an equipollent argument of the same type.
- The Five Modes (*PH*, I.164–177):
 1. From dispute.
 2. From infinity/infinite regress.
 3. From relativity.
 4. From hypothesis.
 5. From reciprocity.
- The Ten Modes (in three groups):
 - Based on the subject who is judging:
 1. Variations among animals.
 2. Differences among humans.
 3. Differences between sense-organs.
 4. Circumstances.
 - Based on the object that is being judged:
 7. Quantities and proportions of things.
 10. Persuasions, customs, laws, belief in myths, and dogmatic suppositions.
 - Based on both the subject and the object:
 5. Positions, intervals, and places.
 6. Mixtures.
 8. Relativity.
 9. Frequent and rare encounters.

Readings & Resources

- The best English translation of Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is:
 - Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, translated by Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes. Cambridge University Press, 2000.Note that the translators have replaced "Pyrrhonism" with "Scepticism" in their title, and that they use the British spelling (with a C) of the latter.
- Peter Adamson's [podcast episode on Sextus Empiricus](#) provides a nice, accessible overview.
- Benjamin Morison's [article on Sextus Empiricus](#) in the free, online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is a meticulously detailed, yet still quite approachable guide. After an introduction on Sextus' life and works, Morison follows Sextus' text section by section, making this article an excellent companion to be read alongside the *Outlines*.