

## Scepticism as Philosophy

### Casey Perin

University of California, Irvine

Email: [cperin@uci.edu](mailto:cperin@uci.edu)

Many of the essays in Richard Bett's *How to Be a Pyrrhonist* are concerned, as his subtitle makes clear, with the practice of Scepticism.<sup>1</sup> A practicing Sceptic is, among other things, and perhaps first of all, a practicing philosopher: Scepticism is a way of being a philosopher and doing philosophy. One of the many virtues of Bett's collection of essays is that in it he raises a number of important, and largely unexplored, questions about Scepticism as philosophy and the Sceptic as a philosopher. One set of questions concern why Sextus wrote philosophical works and how he could do so. Here Bett claims, plausibly, that much of Sextus' writing contributes to the Sceptical activity of generating and sustaining suspension of judgment by being an instance of that activity. But, as Bett recognizes, *PH* 1 is different. He describes Sextus there as "someone imparting a message to his readers" and observes that "the tone of instruction, of the dissemination of a message to readers, is present throughout his work" (*How to be a Pyrrhonist*, 9). Who, then, are the readers for whom Sextus writes, especially in *PH* 1? Bett identifies three possible answers to this question. (1) Sextus might be writing for non-Sceptical philosophers and with a view to defending Scepticism against the charge that it is incoherent or, as a way of life, impossible. (2) Sextus might be addressing those Bett dubs "interested outsiders" who are neither Sceptics nor Dogmatists. It is worth noting that since for Sextus every philosopher is either a Sceptic or a Dogmatist, these interested outsiders can't be philosophers. (3) Sextus' target audience might be fellow Sceptics where his aim is to aid them in their efforts to suspend judgment and live the Sceptical way of life (*How to Be a Pyrrhonist*, 9-11).

There is a fourth possibility that strikes me as the core of Sextus' intended readership: Dogmatists in general. In *PH* 1 Sextus' conception of Dogmatism is broad: anyone who holds any belief about the way things are, on any sort of grounds whatsoever, or on no grounds at all, counts as a Dogmatist. At *PH* 1.223 Sextus says (in the context of dismissing any claim

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<sup>1</sup> For ease of exposition I use 'Scepticism' and 'Sceptic' with a capital 'S' to refer to the form of Pyrrhonian scepticism described by Sextus Empiricus in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. I refer to this work by the standard abbreviation (derived from its title in Greek) *PH*, and I use, often substantially modified, the translation in Sextus Empiricus (2000).

Plato might have to be a Sceptic) that having even one belief, or preferring one conflicting appearance to another as more convincing or credible, makes someone a Dogmatist. The Dogmatist for whom Sextus is writing might but need not be a philosopher. Obviously, much of Sextus' writing outside of *PH* 1 is for philosophers and takes up the issues or disputes that preoccupy them. But in *PH* 1 it is very difficult to see Sextus as writing exclusively or even primarily for philosophers. The Scepticism he describes there is supposed to remove the principal obstacles in human life to happiness understood as tranquility. It does so, for example, by eliminating all beliefs about the value of things (*PH* 1.27-8). These beliefs include all the ordinary or everyday beliefs of the form 'x is good' or 'x is bad'. Everyone, philosopher and non-philosopher alike, has those beliefs and, as a result, experiences anxiety and distress. Moreover, many other arguments or argument-schema deployed by the Sceptic to induce suspension of judgment target ordinary or everyday beliefs. Thus the Ten Modes target beliefs about the colors of things (*PH* 1.44, 1.101, 1.129, 1.126), their shapes and sizes (*PH* 1.47, 1.118), their textures and the way they taste (*PH* 1.52, 1.94, 1.101, 1.119), the value of things (*PH* 1.143-144), matters of decorum, dress, or aesthetic preference (e.g. *PH* 1.148), and preferences and prohibitions concerning sexual practices (*PH* 1.152). Dogmatism of the sort Sextus and the Sceptic reject and claim to cure is not a philosophical phenomenon: some Dogmatists are philosophers, and others (most) are not.

The Dogmatist, whether a philosopher or not, is just whom we should expect Sextus to be addressing in *PH* 1. And this for two reasons. First, every practicing Sceptic is a reformed Dogmatist. The Sceptic might begin as a Dogmatic philosopher. After all, the Sceptical procedures for inducing suspension of judgment can be deployed on or against the Dogmatic philosopher who then abandons his philosophical beliefs. But the Sceptic might also begin as a non-philosopher who becomes a philosopher only upon becoming a Sceptic. It is plausible to read *PH* 1.12 and 1.26 in such a way that the Sceptic begins to do philosophy, as most of us do, with few if any philosophical commitments and with a view to discovering the truth about philosophical matters and acquiring philosophical beliefs. The Sceptic's efforts end not in belief but suspension of judgment (and tranquility). Nonetheless, anyone who becomes a Sceptic was someone who had indefinitely many ordinary, non-philosophical beliefs. (How could it be otherwise?) Some Sceptics might be reformed Dogmatic philosophers, but *every* Sceptic is a reformed ordinary or non-philosophical Dogmatist. Second, and consequently, *PH* 1 is two things at once. It is both a recruitment manual for Scepticism and an early instance of a philosophical genre now, for better or worse, very much in vogue: popular or public philosophy.

Bett argues that two features of Sextus' writing raise a question about whether and in what sense Sextus regards Scepticism as philosophy. First, Bett claims that Sextus deliberately varies his use of the term 'philosophy' and that his doing so is an instance of a more general technique Sextus employs in his writings of varying both his use of important terms and his presentation of arguments (*How To Be A Pyrrhonist*, 15). In some passages, Sextus describes Scepticism as a philosophy and the Sceptic as a philosopher (*PH* 1.3-4, 1.5, 1.11, 2.6, 2.9). In other passages, however, Bett argues that Sextus rejects the application of the term 'philosophy' to the Scepticism and repudiates philosophy as something illegitimate. At *PH* 1.18 and elsewhere (e.g. *PH* 2.1 and 2.12) Sextus makes reference to 'what is called philosophy' (ἡ λεγομένη φιλοσοφία or ἡ καλουμένη φιλοσοφία), and Bett claims that he uses this phrase to distance himself and Scepticism from philosophy. Bett writes that Sextus' "stand-offish phrase 'what is called philosophy' seems both to keep skepticism itself clear of the taint of being called a philosophy and to raise the question whether even those who profess to be philosophers are really entitled to lay claim to the term." ("The Pyrrhonist Dilemma," 16). What are we to make of Sextus' variation in the use of the term 'philosophy'? Here is Bett's answer:

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Sextus is pushing toward a kind of suspension of judgment about the nature of philosophy itself. Is it, by definition, the kind of enterprise in which secure and definite results are achieved -- in which case a skeptic might well question whether any such thing exists? Or does the term encompass any serious and sustained discussion, from whatever point of view, of a certain range of subject matter -- in which case there would be no difficulty in speaking of the 'Pyrrhonist philosopher'? There is no obvious answer to these questions. (*How To Be A Pyrrhonist*, 17)

Second, at the end of *PH* 1 Sextus outlines the differences between Scepticism and those philosophies that lie close to it (τῶν παρακααιμένων αὐτῇ φιλοσοφιῶν) (*PH* 1.209): the philosophies of Heraclitus, Democritus, the Cyrenaics, Protagoras, and various Academics. Bett concludes from a survey of this material that Sextus is reluctant to acknowledge any significant similarity between Scepticism and these other philosophies. And, Bett thinks, there is a relatively simple explanation for Sextus' attitude here:

Sextus considers Pyrrhonist skepticism to be an entirely distinct kind of enterprise from every other philosophical movement, and he thinks that this point cannot be overemphasized. Another way to express this point is that skepticism is not a philosophy

at all, at least as that term is frequently understood. Although Sextus opens *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* by distinguishing three main kinds of philosophy, of which skepticism is one (*PH* 1.1-3), and although he sometimes speaks elsewhere of the 'skeptical philosophy' (e.g. *PH* 1.4, 1.5), he also frequently speaks of non-skeptical philosophy as 'so-called [*kaloumenês* or *legomenês*] philosophy' (e.g. *PH* 1.6, 18), which carries, I think, two implications: first, that these philosophers claim to be doing something that they in fact fail to do, and second, that in this understanding of what philosophy is or should be, Sextus himself has nothing to do with philosophy." (*How To Be A Pyrrhonist*, 42)

Bett is right to draw our attention to Sextus' talk of 'what is called philosophy' (τῆς λεγομένης φιλοσοφίας), but I think he has misidentified the implications of that talk. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes, in their translation of *PH*, render τῆς λεγομένης φιλοσοφίας as 'what they call philosophy'. Bett objects on the grounds that "there is no 'they' in the Greek" ("The Pyrrhonist's Dilemma," 16 n.18). This is true as far as it goes, but it does not go very far. If *x* is called 'philosophy,' then there is someone who calls *x* 'philosophy'. The Greek phrase implicitly refers to those, whoever they are, that call the study of nature together with logic and ethics philosophy. The translation 'what they call philosophy' simply makes explicit what is implicit in the Greek. Sextus' use of the phrase τῆς λεγομένης φιλοσοφίας indicates, as the Annas and Barnes translation makes clear, that some people have a certain conception of philosophy and, on its basis, call what they do or think they have achieved philosophy. Now - - and this is the important point -- by using the phrase τῆς λεγομένης φιλοσοφίας in this way Sextus is at least raising the question whether *that* conception of philosophy, that is, the Dogmatic conception, is correct or mandatory, and so whether other conceptions of philosophy are not only possible but preferable, and whether people other than Dogmatists might count as philosophers. In fact, Sextus not only raises this question but, in the opening chapters of *PH*, answers it in the affirmative. And he does so by offering a different but not wholly unrelated conception of philosophy. It is true, of course, that Sextus, at least if he is consistent, suspends judgment about what philosophy is, that is, about what activities do or don't count as philosophy and why. Nonetheless, Sextus can have a conception of philosophy, but this conception (as with so much else in Scepticism) is a matter of having certain appearances rather than beliefs (however we are to make sense of that distinction).

For Sextus philosophy is simply investigation. That is what the two fundamental kinds of philosophy he identifies at *PH* 1.4 have in common in virtue of which each is a kind of

philosophy.<sup>2</sup> This is a point about Sextus' conception of philosophy and Sextus' conception of the Sceptic as a philosopher. Hence, it is independent of the more controversial point, which Bett does not accept, that much, though not all, of Scepticism is best understood by reference to the notion of the Sceptic as someone engaged in investigation. We might think, as it appears Bett does, that the claim that the Sceptic, unlike the Dogmatist, is still investigating (*PH* 1.3), misrepresents the substance of Scepticism as Sextus describes it (see *How To Be A Pyrrhonist*, 7-8). But this is to think that Scepticism fails to count as philosophy *by Sextus' own conception of philosophy*. It is not to deny that Sextus has a conception of philosophy as investigation.

If Sextus has a conception of philosophy, that fact is relevant to how we understand the implications of his talk of 'what is called philosophy'. Bett thinks Sextus here implies, first, that the Dogmatic philosopher does not do what he claims to do, namely, discover philosophical truths and thereby construct a systematic true account of the way the world is or, in Bett's words, "the true nature of things" ("Skepticism and Other Philosophies," 42). Second, Sextus implies that he and the Sceptic he describes have nothing in common with the Dogmatic philosopher. Hence, the Sceptic is no philosopher, at least on the Dogmatic conception of philosophy. According to Bett, Sextus thus presents Scepticism as "an *entirely* distinct kind of enterprise from every other philosophical movement" and the Sceptic as "doing something *fundamentally* different" from what the Dogmatist philosopher does or claims to do (*How To Be A Pyrrhonist*, 42-43, emphasis mine).

I'm not convinced that Sextus' talk of 'what is called philosophy' has the first implication Bett attributes to it. Instead, Sextus' implication seems to me to be that Dogmatic philosophers are not doing what as philosophers they ought to be doing, that is, they are no longer doing *what Sextus takes to be philosophy*. On *that* conception of philosophy, Dogmatic philosophers are doing philosophy if and only if they are investigating. But, as Sextus tells us, this is precisely what Dogmatic philosophers are *not* doing. It is important, though, that investigating is something Dogmatic philosophers once did and that fact explains why they now have the philosophical beliefs or views they do. Dogmatic philosophy is only 'what is called philosophy' -- that is, something the Dogmatic philosopher mistakenly identifies with philosophy -- because, for Sextus, philosophy does not consist in having philosophical beliefs

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<sup>2</sup> For this point, see Perin (2010), p. 2-3. Of course, Sextus actually says that there are *three* fundamental kinds of philosophy: Scepticism, Dogmatism, and the Academic philosophy. But, as I note in Perin (2017), given that the Academic as Sextus understands him is just a kind of Dogmatist -- namely, one that holds the view that nothing can be known -- these three kinds of philosophy are reducible to two more fundamental kinds: Scepticism and Dogmatism.

and views. Needless to say, Sextus' conception of philosophy is not widely accepted, or even much recognized, in our scholastic age of dogmatic professional philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

If Sextus' talk of 'what is called philosophy' doesn't have the first implication Bett attributes to it, it doesn't have the second implication, either. The conception of philosophy that explains why Dogmatic philosophy is only 'what is called philosophy' is the very conception of philosophy that explains why, and in what sense, Scepticism is a philosophy and the Sceptic a philosopher. Bett is surely right that Sextus resists the description of Scepticism as philosophy *if* philosophy is a matter of having philosophical beliefs and views. But Sextus does simply accept the Dogmatic philosopher's use of the term 'philosophy' and acknowledge, as a consequence of this use, that Scepticism is not philosophy at all. Two points are especially important here. First, on Sextus' own conception of philosophy, having philosophical beliefs or views is not unrelated to philosophy, and for this reason the Dogmatic philosopher's use of the term 'philosophy' is not wholly inapt. It is defective just to the extent that it fails to distinguish the activity that constitutes philosophy from a possible product of that activity. Philosophy for Sextus is the search for truth, and any outcome of that search – whether belief or suspension of judgment – is something that can rightly be called philosophy only in virtue of its relation to that search. Second point: it is true that, according to Sextus, Scepticism is one of the two fundamental kinds of philosophy (*PH* 1.3). Hence, there are fundamental differences between Scepticism and Dogmatic philosophy: the Sceptic is still investigating while the Dogmatic philosopher is not. This is so, in turn, because the Dogmatic philosopher, but not the Sceptic, believes he has discovered philosophical truths and makes assertions that express what he believes to be the philosophical truths he has discovered. But this fundamental difference between Scepticism and Dogmatic philosophy is a difference between kinds of philosophy. Hence, as kinds of philosophy, Scepticism and Dogmatic philosophy must have something *more fundamental* in common. And this common feature is just engagement, past or present, in investigation. It might look as if, as I understand the matter, Sextus wants to have it both ways: Dogmatic philosophy both is and is not philosophy. In fact, I think this is the best way to describe Sextus' attitude toward Dogmatic philosophy. Dogmatic philosophy is (*a*) the having of philosophical beliefs or views (*b*) as a result of engaging in investigation. With respect to (*a*) it is not philosophy, with respect to (*b*) it is, and the conjunction of (*a*) and (*b*) makes it the fundamental kind of philosophy it is.

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<sup>3</sup> Striker (2001, p. 114) asks: "Now if Sceptics are investigators who have no answers to propose, in what sense do they count as philosophers?" Someone would ask this question only if she thought that the important thing in philosophy, and so what makes someone a philosopher, is the having of philosophical beliefs or views. I'm with Sextus in thinking this is at best an optional, and in fact a not particularly appealing, conception of philosophy.

However, and unsurprisingly, matters are more complicated, and here I can do no more than mention the relevant complications. Sextus has not one but *two* conceptions of philosophy. At *PH* 1.11 Sextus identifies "the Pyrrhonian philosopher" (ὁ Πυρρώνειος φιλόσοφος) as someone who has the ability (δύναμις) said at *PH* 1.8 to be constitutive of Scepticism. This is the ability to induce suspension of judgment and instill tranquility by constructing equipollent oppositions or conflicts between candidates for belief. Now Sextus is not saying that the Pyrrhonian philosopher is someone who just happens to have the Sceptical ability – that, somehow or other, everyone who is a Pyrrhonian philosopher is also someone who has the Sceptical ability. Instead, at *PH* 1.11 Sextus is *defining* the Pyrrhonian philosopher: what makes someone a Pyrrhonian philosopher, rather than some other kind of philosopher, is the possession of the Sceptical ability. But we were told at the outset of *PH* that what makes someone a Sceptic, and so a Sceptical rather a Dogmatic philosopher, is the fact that he is *still* investigating. We might try to make these two accounts of the Sceptic as philosopher consistent by taking the exercise of the Sceptical ability to be one kind of investigation. But even if we can make sense of the idea that something other than the search for truth can count as investigation, Sextus himself conceives of investigation as the search for truth. When he says that the Sceptic is still investigating, he is saying that the Sceptic is still doing the very same thing the Dogmatic philosopher once did but is no longer doing: searching for the truth.<sup>4</sup> So by Sextus' own lights the kind of investigation in which the Sceptic is still engaged does *not* consist in the exercise of the Sceptical ability. The upshot is that *PH* 1.11 presupposes a conception of philosophy different from the one on which Sextus' division of the fundamental kinds of philosophy at *PH* 1.1-4 is based. And that is a conception of philosophy as therapy, that is, a practice whose goal is tranquility rather than the discovery of truth. On this conception of philosophy, the Dogmatic philosopher will count as a philosopher if he is engaged in the same therapeutic enterprise. And he will differ from the Sceptic in the method by which he attempts to achieve their shared goal: where the Sceptic induces suspension of judgment, the Dogmatist deploys the fixation of belief.

#### References:

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<sup>4</sup> For this point see again my *The Demands of Reason*, p. 8.

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