

## **PRÉCIS OF *SEXTUS, MONTAIGNE, HUME: PYRRHONIZERS***

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*Sextus, Montaigne, Hume: Pyrrhonizers* (SMHP)<sup>1</sup> represents an attempt to (i) articulate, develop, and support textually-rooted and philosophically-attractive readings of Sextus, Montaigne, and Hume as radical Pyrrhonizing skeptics, as well as to (ii) explore the implications of these readings for a set of questions related to our responsiveness to reason and the nature and extent of our epistemic agency and, finally, to (iii) use these readings to assemble and then evaluate a set of proposals from Sextus, Montaigne, and Hume regarding the “fruits” (or apparent goods) alleged to result from sustained engagement with skeptical inquiry. Chapters 2-4 and 6 primarily tackle task (i); Chapters 1 and 5 are primarily devoted to (ii); and Chapters 7 and 8 primarily address (iii). Naturally, however, this division of tasks is only an approximation, and to some extent (i), (ii), and (iii) remain topics of concern throughout the book. The book itself consists of an Introduction and eight chapters.

The Introduction distinguishes between two traditions within Western philosophy beginning with the Greeks, one constructive and the other critical, and it locates the ancient skeptics (Academic and Pyrrhonian) within the critical tradition. My specific concern in the book is with the Pyrrhonian approach as found in the works of Sextus Empiricus, which I take to be “a form of radical skepticism based upon the *skeptical ability* to problematize and cast doubt upon all open-to-dispute matters brought under scrutiny during inquiry (PH 1.8-9, 19-20, 200, 202-203)” (SMHP 2). Those inquirers who exercise this skeptical ability I call *Pyrrhonizers*. In my conception, while Pyrrhonizers may fail to achieve complete suspension of judgment, “they relentlessly, ruthlessly inquire and, *crucially*, they make no claim, concerning any beliefs they *may* hold, that those beliefs enjoy any positive epistemic status” (SMHP 3).

Within the constructive tradition, constructive philosophers seek to become wise, free, and happy by using philosophical reflection to bring about self-transformative changes. But this optimistic view concerning our natural responsiveness to reason—i.e., our capacity to use reason as a means of effecting self-transformative change—is subject to challenge. What if our minds are not responsive to reason in the way or to the extent that the constructive philosophers suppose? As later chapters will show, some skeptics (especially Montaigne and Hume) have taken far more pessimistic views about the reason-responsiveness of the human mind. But if reason may lack the power to transform us into wise, free, and happy individuals (as the constructive tradition promises), what sorts of goods, if any, remain available to the skeptical inquirer?

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<sup>1</sup> I will cite this parenthetically in the main text as SMHP followed by page number(s). (While hardback copies of SMHP are undeniably pricey, if your institution’s library has purchased the e-book, you are then allowed to order a print-on-demand paperback copy for just \$25 through Brill’s My Book program: <https://brill.com/page/mybook/>.)

My way of exploring these questions is to consider three of Western philosophy's most notorious skeptical thinkers. No one can dispute the central place of skeptical reasoning in the works of Sextus, Montaigne, or Hume, though some interpreters have sought to downplay or reframe or reconceive the radically skeptical elements within their works. One way to think about my approach in SMHP is to gamify the project: the challenge is to put forward the *best possible readings* of Sextus, Montaigne, and Hume as radical Pyrrhonizing skeptics. Such readings face both textual and philosophical obstacles, which I seek to address. However, attempting to attack, undermine, or outright defeat all available less-than-radically-skeptical readings of each figure has not been my primary concern, though I've certainly done some of that.<sup>2</sup> Instead, I offer those who reject my readings a new challenge: attempt to outflank, undermine, or outright defeat the radically-skeptical readings proposed in SMHP. Or, as I put the point in the book, "Those who prefer other, less radically skeptical readings of Sextus, Montaigne, or Hume can view the present work as working out (what I hope are) plausible readings of each figure to be used as targets for scholarly discussion and critique" (SMHP 8).

In order to lay some groundwork, Chapter 1 defends the thesis that epistemic akrasia—in which S clear-headedly forms (or remains in) a doxastic state which S clear-headedly judges to other than the doxastic state best supported by the arguments and evidence (= the reasons) S is aware of—is both possible *and* actual. How is this thesis defended? Consider that there are some philosophical arguments which have, at some time, seemed entirely persuasive to some philosophers who were nonetheless unable to conform their doxastic states to the reasons provided by those arguments. For example, some philosophers—my own earlier self, early Peter Unger, early Keith Lehrer—have defended arguments for radical skeptical views and yet these same philosophers surely did not manage to conform their doxastic states to their skeptical conclusions. These cases therefore serve to show that we are *not* such that our doxastic states *always* "match" our considered assessment of our reasons. In other words, the demands of epistemic rationality and the realities of human psychology can pull apart, and—as we will see in Chapter 2—the rift thereby revealed is one which skeptical cartography can be used to "map."

Chapter 2 argues for the thesis that Sextus, Montaigne, and Hume share a *similarity of method*, insofar as each can be read as a radical Pyrrhonizing skeptic, yet we also find *differences in the results* of their applications of that shared method. Sextus, e.g., deploys his Pyrrhonizing doubts and finds that, in all the cases he investigates, he is faced with undecidable equipollence (*isostheneia*) between opposing claims, and this leads (he says) to suspension of judgment (*epochē*) which, in turn, produces tranquility (*ataraxia*). When Sextus is read as a radical skeptic, one who abjures belief überhaupt (e.g., PH 1.223), he is then faced with answering the *apraxia* (inaction) objection: how will he live his life? To this, Sextus responds by appealing to the fourfold regimen and the following of appearances. In contrast, Montaigne and Hume both find that Pyrrhonizing doubts do *not* generate complete suspension of judgment. Thus, while all three thinkers deploy Pyrrhonizing doubt, their resulting cartographic surveys reveal quite different pictures of that-which-resists-doubt. Some things, as Sextus says, are "impossible to get rid of by the sceptic's method of reasoning" (M 11.148), but as for the detailed mapping of these skeptically impervious, doubt-resisting elements which skeptical inquiry reveals, our three skeptical cartographers disagree.

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<sup>2</sup> My critical discussion of such alternative interpretations is mostly to be found in the footnotes.

In Sextus's (official, explicit) account, that-which-resists-doubt is a tiny island in a vast sea of doubt, consisting of nothing more than the adherence to appearances and the fourfold regimen. This view, then, simply assumes that skeptical inquiries will generate wide-scope *epochē* and the abjuring of belief überhaupt. (That assumption is disputed, and an alternative way of understanding Sextan Pyrrhonism is proposed, in Chapter 3.) While Montaigne deploys the very *same* Pyrrhonizing doubts as Sextus (see SMHP 27-28), Montaigne finds that his Catholic faith nonetheless stands fast in the face of these doubts. This particular combination of views is what Richard Popkin taught us to call *skeptical fideism* (= radical skepticism combined with continuing adherence to certain religious beliefs and/or practices).<sup>3</sup> Lastly, like Sextus and Montaigne before him, Hume deploys Pyrrhonizing doubts about our beliefs, such as (e.g) our inductive beliefs founded upon the assumption of nature's uniformity. Yet Hume is adamant that these skeptically-problematized beliefs of ours appear to be *psychologically irresistible*. Thus, for Hume, the Pyrrhonizing inquirer will *not* (be able to) suspend judgment überhaupt. Nonetheless, I note several points which soften the contrast between Sextus's account and Hume's. First, the inductive beliefs we retain according to Hume benefit from comparison with Sextus's account of recollective signs, which are accepted by the Sextan Pyrrhonist; second, Hume's account of *belief* treats belief as a naturally-occurring, instinct-based *feeling*, which admits of useful comparison with Sextus's stance on the skeptic's attitude toward his *pathē* (feelings, affections), which cannot be eliminated according to Sextus.

Lastly, Chapter 2 argues that, despite the differences between Sextus, Montaigne, and Hume, these differences need not represent any *philosophical* dispute between them. Since all three find that *some things* simply stand fast in the face of skeptical doubts, and since all three agree that these doubt-resistant elements are composed of some mixture of nature and custom, their dispute in specifying the doubt-resistant elements can be understood as merely empirical, viz. which elements of human psychology and human social conditioning are "impossible to remove by the sceptic's method of reasoning"? Subsequent chapters further explore the details of each Pyrrhonizer's own view.

Chapter 3 addresses a problem in understanding Sextus, who says that when the Pyrrhonizing inquirer discovers undecidable oppositions, *he will suspend judgment* (and thereby achieve tranquility). Many have objected, however, that to suspend judgment überhaupt is *psychologically impossible*. In response, I defend an aspirationalist reading of Sextus which holds that complete suspension of judgment represents a skeptical ideal for Sextus, one toward which he aspires but may never fully reach. A short Postscript to Chapter 2 argues that the radical *Academic* skeptic Cicero is (also) plausibly read as an *aspirationalist* radical skeptic and that this shows, at least, that (1) the aspirationalist reading is not in any way anachronistic and that (2) an aspirationalist approach "could appeal to an intelligent self-avowed radical skeptic" (SMHP 65).<sup>4</sup>

Aside from his avowals of faith, the *Essays* of Montaigne also appear to record many *other* (non-faith-related) claims and judgments, judgments of a sort that a Sextan Pyrrhonist would not approve. In Chapter 4, after first arguing that Montaigne should in fact be read as a Pyrrhonist, not as an Academic skeptic, I tackle the interpretive problem posed (for the Pyrrhonian interpretation of Montaigne) by all of Montaigne's (skeptically-verboten) *judgments*. I make two

<sup>3</sup> For this particular analysis of skeptical fideism, see Ribeiro 2019, esp. 96-97.

<sup>4</sup> My reading of Cicero as an aspirationalist radical skeptic receives a fuller exposition and defense in Ribeiro Forthcoming. Relatedly, in SMHP I float the suggestion in two footnotes (62n.26; 65n.30) that the aspirationalist reading might also be applied to Pyrrho of Elis. In Ribeiro 2022 I defend an aspirationalist reading of Pyrrho.

main interpretive suggestions. First, I point out that Montaigne packages his text with a unique kind of caveat—most fundamentally in his 1580 “Note to the Reader” but also in many other places within the *Essays*—a caveat which directs the reader to see the entirety of the *Essays* as an autobiographical examination of his own ideas: He is telling us (primarily) about *himself*, rather than the things he writes about. The *Essays* is “a document of self-examination, one which brackets questions of extrapersonal truth in favor of intrapersonal exploration” (SMHP 78). Second, I argue that both his title (*Essais* or “Attempts”) and the content of the *Essays* can be understood as suggesting a work ever-*unfinished*, ever-*evolving*, ever-*expanding*. For Montaigne, the very act of essay-writing—“the *writing* (and *revisiting* and *revising*)” (SMHP 81)—becomes a way of exercising the skeptical ability. Montaigne’s text *enacts*, for *him*, in the *present moment*, the activity of skeptical inquiry. Only for *us*, as distant and detached readers, will his text appear finished, static, or assertive.

Having provided a fuller account of Montaigne’s Pyrrhonizing in Chapter 4, and before turning my focus more exclusively to Hume in Chapter 6, Chapter 5 does two things aiming to deepen or further advance ideas previously discussed. First, I pause to ask how Hume might have responded to Montaigne’s skeptical fideism. On the one hand, as a frequent critic of religious belief, one might expect Hume to be critical of Montaigne’s avowal of faith; but, on the other hand, as a skeptic who likewise acknowledges that many beliefs are impervious to Pyrrhonizing doubt, one might expect Hume to be somewhat sympathetic to Montaigne’s avowal of faith. Based on a consideration of evidence from Hume’s letters and the *Dialogues*, I argue that Hume can easily be read as broadly sympathetic to Montaigne’s skeptical fideism and that Hume might *himself* have been—or have been at some times, or in some moods—subject to belief in something like (what Popkin calls) tepid deism.

Second, Hume’s potential sympathy with Montaigne’s skeptical fideism *and* his own possible (though possibly intermittent) deism are both connected to his highly pessimistic take on our responsiveness to reason. The remainder of Chapter 5 articulates Hume’s pessimism more explicitly. This involves presenting a Humean argument that aims to show that we suffer from a pervasive lack of (what I call) *rational self-control*. Here, I develop this notion of rational self-control, which serves as the norm from which episodes of epistemic akrasia (Chapter 1) are departures: “To be in rational self-control is to be self-controlled *with respect to reasons*” (SMHP 91). If Hume’s pessimism is correct, many of our beliefs are not subject to rational self-control.

Thus far, my account of Hume has only briefly alluded to the skepticism/naturalism debate that haunts Hume studies.<sup>5</sup> Here, in Chapter 6, that bill has come due, and I turn my full attention to this deep interpretive puzzle. After first taking a textual survey (focused on EHU) of the available evidence supporting each side of the debate, I argue for a fairly radical interpretive view: namely, the view—previously advocated in an important paper by Karánn Durland<sup>6</sup>—that it appears impossible to develop *any* fully satisfying and consistent reading of the *entirety* of Hume’s works. My overall argument for this interpretive pessimism has two stages. In the first, I consider the debate at the macro-level and—drawing on Durland’s work—I argue that none of the available readings of Hume are satisfactory: in short, “there is no way to unvex Hume’s philosophy and achieve some pleasing resolution to the skepticism/naturalism tension that infects his thinking” (SMHP 98). The second stage of my argument for interpretive pessimism begins with the observation that we are unlikely to uncover any new evidence (texts

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<sup>5</sup> See esp. SMHP 36n.32, 89, and 95n.22.

<sup>6</sup> See Durland 2011.

from Hume) which would contribute to resolving the existing debate. And, indeed, the problem is not that we need *more* texts from Hume, but rather that we have a substantial corpus of texts already, and the texts we have “*fairly obviously* contain some vexing tensions” (SMHP 108). That means that “[a]nyone can cherry-pick the texts in support of a given reading, for this simple reason: *Hume’s texts definitely have several different varieties of cherries in(side) them!*” (ibid.).

Thus, forsaking all hope of successful Hume interpretation, I propose we instead consider (what I call) the *great Humean tapestry*. Within the great Humean tapestry, there are several *different* Humes which we might selectively attend to. In particular, by focusing *only* on the skeptical threads of the great Humean tapestry, we can find a Skeptical-Hume: “there in the great Humean tapestry, a Skeptical-Hume is still available to us. From him, we might still be offered reflections on the extent of our epistemic agency, our responsiveness to reasons, or the inner transformations which skeptical thought might engender for us” (SMHP 111).

In Chapter 7 I test my hypothesis that we can profitably divide up sets of threads within the great Humean tapestry and attend *only* to the skeptical threads.<sup>7</sup> In particular, I argue that Skeptical-Hume had a lifelong preoccupation with questions about the “durability” of skepticism—i.e., “the extent to which skeptical insights can have an abiding influence on our cognitive lives” (SMHP 113)—and that his answers to those questions changed and evolved from the *Treatise* to the First *Enquiry* to the *Dialogues*. What emerges from a rather detailed textual survey and analysis of these three works is the view, best expressed in the *Dialogues*, that skepticism *can* in fact transform us in an enduring way, namely by generating within us the virtue of *intellectual modesty*. The chapter concludes by examining the connections between Hume’s advocacy of intellectual modesty and the related views defended by skeptical fideists like Montaigne.

The book’s final chapter draws together the various alleged goods that might be thought to emerge from sustained engagement with skeptical philosophizing. While most of these “fruits of skepticism” (as I call them) have already received some discussion in Chapters 2-7, here in Chapter 8 they receive further analysis and are connected up with various historical and contemporary figures and issues in philosophy (including comparative philosophy) and psychology. Possible “fruits of skepticism” discussed here include (the ability to engage in truly) *open-minded inquiry*, (the increasing of one’s) *mental tranquility*, (a motivation for making) *the inward turn* along with (the promotion and possible benefits of) *mindfulness*, and, lastly, (becoming someone who exemplifies) *intellectual modesty*. The chapter concludes with a few “Parting Remarks,” drawing the work to a close.

## References

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<sup>7</sup> My view is that other scholars, with different interests and motivations, could—and should—apply a similar approach and explore *Naturalist-Hume*.