

Précis of How to be a Pyrrhonist: the Practice and the Significance of Pyrrhonian Skepticism

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The book consists of a series of essays, all but one previously published, on various aspects of Pyrrhonian skepticism. It is divided into four sections, each containing three essays. The volume as a whole can be said to be animated by two major concerns. One is a concern with the actual practice of Pyrrhonism, with how it looks in detail. The other is a concern with the ways in which Pyrrhonism may have lessons for us today, rather than being of purely historical interest. In what follows I give a brief outline of each essay.

Section 1, How the Pyrrhonists Present Themselves

“The Pyrrhonist’s Dilemma: What to Write if you have Nothing to Say” examines Sextus Empiricus’ practice of writing. It begins by questioning why someone who has, in many ways, given up on the search for truth would write at all; at any rate one had better be careful not to seem like a normal philosopher. It looks at Sextus’ basic outlook to explain why he faces this constraint on his manner of writing. It then identifies three possible purposes for writing as a skeptic: to defend skepticism against attacks by others, to explain skepticism to those unfamiliar with it, and to supply useful material to his fellow skeptics. It continues by illustrating a recurring technique, labeled “variation”, that Sextus uses in the service of these ends.

“Why Care Whether Skepticism is Different from Other Philosophies?” considers Sextus’ response, in the closing chapters of book 1 of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, to arguments connecting skepticism with numerous earlier philosophies. The nature and sources of such arguments, as indicated by evidence in Diogenes Laertius and elsewhere, is examined, although it is suggested that much about these questions must remain inconclusive. But most of the paper is devoted to a detailed analysis of Sextus’ counter-arguments. In almost every case, Sextus is shown to be very strongly opposed to any rapprochement of skepticism to other philosophies. This is all the more surprising given the increasing tendency in the philosophy of later antiquity to appeal to predecessors. Sextus’ attitude is explained as the product of a

desire to make as clear as possible that skepticism is not in fact a philosophy at all, in the usual sense of the term.

“Humor as Philosophical Subversion, Especially in the Sceptics” begins by observing that when humor is used in philosophy, it is often to draw attention to where one might go wrong: someone or something is made fun of. This is first illustrated with cases in Aristotle. But if this is a major function of humor in philosophy, it offers special opportunities to those whose entire approach to philosophy is critical rather than constructive - those who are suspicious of the whole project of philosophy. The essay examines a number of instances of this subversive form of humor in philosophy. For the reason just stated, it concentrates on the ancient Greek skeptics, both Academic and Pyrrhonian, with a particular focus on Sextus Empiricus. But Stoics and Epicureans (and, in passing, Plato) also receive some attention, and there are occasional comparisons with examples in more recent philosophy (Gettier, Nietzsche).

Section 2, Pyrrhonists art Work: Specific Topics

“The Sign in the Pyrrhonian Tradition” focuses on Aenesidemus' treatment of signs, and on some significant differences that appear to exist between this and Sextus' treatment of the same subject. Evidence from Photius suggests that Aenesidemus denied the existence of signs, and connected this with arguments against the possibility of understanding nature. Aenesidemus' denial that signs exist, as opposed to the suspension of judgment that one finds in Sextus, is explained as belonging to an earlier version of Pyrrhonism, espoused by Aenesidemus more generally, in which such negative conclusions were permissible. The essay then contrasts Aenesidemus' blanket rejection of signs with Sextus' acceptance of a certain kind of sign, the commemorative sign, for the skeptic's own use. This is explained by Aenesidemus' restriction of the notion of sign to what Sextus would call the indicative sign; indicative signs would involve a grasp of the nature of things, whereas commemorative signs do not. The essay ends with a lesson, drawn from a comparison of Sextus' two discussions of signs, about the order of composition of his works.

“Aenesidemus the Anti-Physicist” considers how Aenesidemus may have approached one particular topic in physics. We are not specifically told that Aenesidemus turned his attention to the concepts of space and place. However, one of the Ten Modes, which Sextus ascribes to Aenesidemus, has to do with “positions and distances and places”. Several other authors besides Sextus offer brief reports on this Mode. Using all these sources together, this

essay attempts to determine what Aenesidemus' version of this Mode looked like. It centers on the idea that our grasp of the nature of things is thwarted by the fact that things are always viewed in some place or at some interval from the viewer; the nature of a thing would be the way it was independent of circumstances, but places and positions (like many other factors dealt with in the Modes) introduce a restriction to specific circumstances. The essay ends with speculation about how this may have been connected to Aenesidemus' broader approach to physics.

“The Modes in Sextus: Theory and Practie” considers Sextus' official presentation of the Ten Modes and the Five Modes in book 1 of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, but also what he does with them in the rest of his work. A central question is whether these Modes are consistent with skeptical suspension of judgment, and with Sextus' description of skepticism as an “ability”. The Ten Modes appear, rather, to be arguing for the rational necessity of their conclusions, although there are signs that Sextus tried to mitigate this impression. It also appears that they were designed by Aenesidemus for a purpose that is of little use for Sextus' later version of Pyrrhonism, and this is perhaps the main reason why he almost never refers to them in the rest of his work. The Five Modes, by contrast, are more amenable to Sextus' usual procedure of producing suspension of judgment among opposing alternatives, and they are frequently appealed to in his other books. On the other hand, he is reluctant to use them as a system, as they were clearly intended. The conclusion is that the Modes are less important in practice for Sextus than his initial presentation of them might lead one to expect.

Section 3, Life as a Pyrrhonist

“What Kind of Self Can a Greek Skeptic Have?” begins by describing two different models of the self: 1) a permanent subject of states of consciousness, and 2) a stable, but not immutable, construct of interconnected personality traits, centered around one's rationality, disposed in a particular way, and a particular collection of values, cares, and concerns. A worry is sometimes expressed that the ancient Greek skeptic is not able to live a full human life - or, in other words, to have a full self of the second kind; the rest of the essay examines this question. Although a skeptic does have both rationality and values, the worry has some substance. Since a skeptic, by definition, takes no stand on how things actually are, this radically reduces the level of investment in his/her rationality and values, compared with a normal human being. By definition, a skeptic cannot have any core commitments; indeed, this is why the Pyrrhonists claim that a skeptic is more tranquil than other people. But this leaves the self both thin and

unanchored. The evidence suggests that Pyrrho, at least, was unconcerned about the somewhat inhuman effect this produces.

“How Ethical Can an Ancient Skeptic Be?” asks whether the skeptic has the resources to live a life that the rest of us would consider ethically robust. The skeptic suspends judgment about all claims concerning the nature of things, and this includes whether anything is by nature good or bad. According to Sextus, this is instrumental in producing the skeptic's *ataraxia*; belief that something is good or bad can only cause trouble. But this seems more convincing in some cases than others. In addition, the skeptic acts by following appearances, which is a strikingly passive way of reacting to the world; one simply follows one's current dispositions. And this in turn raises questions about one's ability to confront unforeseen moral challenges. In such cases, the skeptic is likely to take the easiest, or the most conformist, course of action; and even if s/he does the right thing, it will not be out of any sense of commitment. The central factor here is the skeptic's goal of *ataraxia*, which precludes strong commitments of any kind. For this reason the skeptic will not be impressed by these criticisms; but others are likely to find the skeptic's existence ethically impoverished.

“Living as a Skeptic” considers what it means to live as a skeptic, and how far some version of this might still be viable or worthwhile today. The skeptics suspend judgment, and they also argue that this is quite compatible with living a human life. In addition, the Pyrrhonists claim that this results in *ataraxia*, giving two seemingly different accounts of why this is so. The skeptic's life is filled with argumentative activity, designed to produce or maintain suspension of judgment. It also involves following various different types of appearances, which shape one's actions. This seems to allow a wide range of behavior, but it is marked by a passivity and (this is the whole point) a lack of fundamental commitment. One may object that there are other things to care about besides *ataraxia*. One may also question whether the Pyrrhonist's proposed methods of achieving it are credible. Without this as the goal, the idea of skepticism as a way of life loses focus. But in any case, suspension of judgment is not as widely available to us as it was to the ancients. Nonetheless, a scaled-down contemporary skepticism may still have some benefits.

Section 4, Intersections of Pyrrhonism with Contemporary Thought

“Can an Ancient Skeptic be *Eudaimôn* (or Happy)?” explores whether the skeptic can achieve *eudaimonia*, usually translated “happiness”, and what this may mean for us today. Both Academics and Pyrrhonists take some trouble to argue that *eudaimonia* is possible on skeptical

principles; the Pyrrhonists also claim that the skeptic is better off than others, because of the *ataraxia* that skepticism brings. However, in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, his most polished work, Sextus never uses the word *eudaimonia* of the skeptic's life. While it is not obvious why this should be so, it seems to be due to the role the word normally has in Greek ethics, where it is tied to certain theoretical presuppositions about how one should live. This then leaves open the question whether the skeptic can claim to be *happy*. But it turns out that assessments of happiness also bring with them non-skeptical assumptions about what it is for a life to go well. Pyrrhonism gives us a vivid picture of what it would be like to do without those assumptions. It is unlikely that this would be found widely attractive today, and this point is developed by drawing on insights from several modern philosophers.

“On Pyrrhonism, Stances, and Believing What You Want” considers the relations between the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus and epistemological voluntarism. In the first part, the main question is whether ancient skepticism is congenial to the idea of alternative epistemic stances (and hence, potentially, to voluntarism about them). The answer proposed is that skepticism does not in fact recognize this possibility. However, this is not due to any essential features of skepticism itself; rather, it is because, like ancient Greek philosophy in general, the stance skepticism unquestioningly assumes is that of realism. In the second part, the focus is more directly on voluntarism and its compatibility with skepticism. The difficulty with bringing these two together, it is argued, is that, while voluntarism gives one license to hold either of two opposing beliefs, skepticism is in the business of *subverting* beliefs; in this respect their orientations are in opposite directions. A closing suggestion is that if there is any place where ancient skepticism and voluntarism might meet, it is not in the Pyrrhonian tradition, but in the mitigated skepticism of the late Academy, which allowed the holding of (albeit tentative) beliefs.

“Can We Be Ancient Skeptics” considers how far Pyrrhonism might be a viable outlook today. The answer depends in part on the range of issues on which suspension of judgment might plausibly be generated in today's intellectual climate. On many ethical, religious and philosophical issues, the prospects seem just as good as in Sextus' day. Concerning natural science, the matter is more complicated. Here there are many issues where we know too much for suspension of judgment to be realistic, and where science has infiltrated ordinary life. On the other hand, suspension of judgment is possible on some issues, such as climate change, where there is a vocal popular opinion about a scientific question. In addition, it is possible on philosophical questions concerning the status of science itself, questions that did not occur to the ancients. A further issue is the *value* of suspension of judgment. Here Sextus seems overly

ambitious, because of exaggerated claims about *ataraxia* as its outcome. Whether suspension of judgment would yield *ataraxia* depends on people's character and circumstances, regardless of the perceived importance of the topic. What remains is a worthwhile recommendation to be open-minded.

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