

REPLY TO MY COMMENTATORS, PART 2

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In the previous volume of *Sképsis* (vol. 20) I responded to four sets of comments on my new collection of essays. At that time I anticipated one more set, from Michael Williams. But now I find myself the recipient of not one, but three – all of them centered on the one new essay in the collection, the essay on the Modes, though all range more widely (sometimes, much more widely¹) in their scrutiny of my views. I can only repeat that I'm greatly honored to have had so much attention devoted to my work, and I extend my gratitude to the three contributors to this volume. I have been in dialogue about skepticism for many years both with Michael Williams (as I noted in the preface to the collection itself) and with Plínio Smith (as I noted in the Reply to my Commentators in the previous volume of *Sképsis*). Compared with them, Roger Eichorn is a relatively new voice, but he is clearly an important one; I could already see this when I first read his 2014 paper “How (Not) to Read Sextus Empiricus”², and my opinion is only strengthened after reading his present contribution. I have learned a good deal from these three, just as I did from the four scholars who wrote for the previous volume.

Since all three contributions are quite substantial, I am not going to attempt a detailed reply; the sheer amount to be covered would make this intolerable for almost any reader. And given that my paper on the Modes actually appears in this volume alongside the three sets of comments, there is already an exchange of views represented here (at least, for those who can read both Portuguese and English). I will simply touch on a few salient points that will perhaps help to clarify where I stand in relation to each of the three.

Both Williams and Smith, in different ways, question my division between “psychological” and “rational” ways of reading the Modes, and Pyrrhonism more generally. (So does Eichorn, but I find it easier to deal with his treatment separately.) I think this is a fair point. The skeptic clearly engages, actively and energetically, in reasoning; indeed, the first of the four main types of appearances by which the skeptic is guided in action and discussion – “guidance of nature” – is glossed by Sextus as that by which “we are naturally perceivers *and thinkers* [αἰσθητικοὶ καὶ νοητικοὶ]” (PH 1.24). I have explored this a little further in a pair of forthcoming papers³. The crucial point, on which I am certainly in agreement with Williams and I think also with Smith, is that Sextus does not actively endorse norms of rationality that would lead him to conclude that he *ought*, as a matter of rational necessity, to suspend judgment; instead, he allows his naturally given thinking capacities, including his ability to formulate arguments relevant to the context, and his susceptibility to persuasive lines of reasoning towards opposing conclusions, to lead him to this outcome. That is what I was attempting to capture with the label “psychological”, which I concede was misleading when placed in

¹ It must be some time since anyone cited my earliest published effort on ancient Greek skepticism, referred to by Eichorn as Bett 1987.

² Eichorn 2014.

³ Bett forthcoming a and b.

contrast with the label “rational”. I have also broadened my conception of skeptical “investigation”, and I now agree with Williams (and I suspect Smith would be on the same side) that there is no real problem in seeing the skeptic as an investigator. I gave some attention to this point in the Reply to my Commentators in vol. 20, so I will not belabor it here.

In general I see both Williams and Smith as offering attractive visions of what a consistent and viable Pyrrhonism would look like. I don’t doubt that Sextus aspires to something like the approaches they describe. But I persist in thinking that Sextus doesn’t quite live up to the models they provide, and that historical developments in the Pyrrhonian tradition are at least part of the explanation for this.

Williams sees the exposition of the Modes in book I of *Outlines* as having a very specific role: raising the epistemological problem of the criterion. As textual support for this he cites a remark in Sextus’ chapter on the skeptic’s criterion – or “standard”, in the Annas & Barnes translation that Williams quotes. There are criteria of truth and criteria of action; the skeptic adopts a version of the latter, which Sextus talks about in this chapter, whereas the former, he says, he will talk about later (*PH* 1.21). Williams reads this as a reference forward to the treatment of the Modes in book I. But I don’t think this can be right. Annas & Barnes’ translation of the relevant phrase is, “we shall talk about these standards when we turn to attack them”. But this is a little loose; the Greek is *en tōi antirrêtikōi logōi*, “in the account involving counter-arguments”. This is clearly a reference to what Sextus earlier called the “specific account [*eidikos logos*]” of skepticism, namely the one “in which we argue against [*antilegomen*] each part of so-called philosophy” (*PH* 1.6) – the account that takes up books II and III of *Outlines*. The traditional view that the reference is to Sextus’ discussion of the criterion of truth in book II is correct.

This, of course, does not show that the Modes do not have the function Williams ascribes to them. But I see a further difficulty with the idea that Sextus wishes to assign the Modes this specific role. Williams says that “The Modes are introduced after the skeptic has described his dialectical ability” (170). Well, yes and no. They come immediately after the opening chapters in which Sextus gives a general overview of how skepticism works. But when he shifts to the Modes, he does not speak as if he is opening up a new topic. On the contrary, the Modes are introduced as *illustrative* of just the general “dialectical ability” he has been describing. The short chapter introducing the treatment of the Modes begins “Since we said that tranquility follows suspension of judgment about everything, the next thing for us to talk about would be how we get to suspension of judgment” (*PH* 1.31); and he goes on to introduce the skeptical practice of assembling oppositions, of which the Modes are his prime exemplar. It seems to me, therefore, that Sextus sees the Modes as a continuation of the opening discussion, giving much more detail on something that was only hinted at in the opening chapters – namely, what the skeptic’s “ability” to produce oppositions actually looks like in practice.

Thus I am not convinced by Williams’ argument about the structure of book I and the special job of the Modes in that structure. That said, I quite agree with him that the Five Modes are characteristically used to raise problems about justification, in which the question whether there is any reliable criterion of truth is central. In his initial presentation of them in book I, as I pointed out in my Modes chapter, Sextus occasionally makes it sound as the Five Modes are knock-down arguments to the effect that one must suspend judgment – in other words, arguments conforming to what Williams calls the Standard Model. So I think Williams is a little too generous when he suggests (164) that Sextus never succumbs to this way

of talking about his procedure. However, there are also numerous indications (as I also stressed) that he is trying to avoid giving that impression. And when it comes to his actual employment of the Five Modes in the rest of his work, the kind of dialectical model Williams lays out seems to me generally very plausible.

When it comes to the Ten Modes, I am not so sure. I have no doubt Williams is right that Sextus tries to assimilate the Ten to the Five, and this is the main thing that distinguishes Sextus' version of the Ten Modes from that of Diogenes Laertius. However, I don't think Sextus does as clean or complete a job of it as Williams proposes (though his final words, "Sextus had at least some grasp of what is required", qualify the picture, and I would not dissent from this formulation). The Five Modes certainly make an appearance in Sextus' version of the Ten – specifically, in the first five of them, which Williams quite reasonably regards as the ones Sextus has done the most to rework. (They don't seem to be present at all in Modes 6-10; I had not noticed this difference, which is indeed interesting.) What I don't see is the elegant sequence of moves, derived from the Five Modes in the canonical order in which they appear both in Sextus and in Diogenes, that Williams finds in the first five of the Ten (in Sextus' order)⁴. As I documented in my paper, the usual approach in the Ten Modes is to infer the necessity of suspension of judgment about the nature of things directly from the relativity of appearances. This is true of the first five (*PH* 1.59, 87, 93, 112, 121) as well as the last five; it is alien to Sextus' normal method (as I see it, it comes from Aenesidemus), and he tries to paper it over, and to shift the model to something like that of the Five Modes. But it is a half-hearted effort (only even attempted in the first five of the Ten), and it seems to me that his considered verdict on the Ten Modes is revealed by the fact that he almost never appeals to them after laying them out in book I; they are just not much good for his purposes.

Williams puts much emphasis on the idea that one would not expect Sextus to be insensitive to, or untroubled by, an inconsistency as glaring as that between the Modes – if one reads them as "a few brief arguments to show that, since no question can be definitively settled, no one knows the truth about anything" (160) – and his account of the skeptic's oppositional "ability". I'm not convinced that the issue is so obvious. It took me many years to get a clear perspective on it, and Williams himself did quite a bit to help me see it straight; as he points out, readers of Sextus often don't seem to notice the problem. Nonetheless, I agree with Williams that Sextus does have an awareness of it; I just don't go as far as he does in thinking Sextus has adequately addressed it. This may be because Sextus is not the world's greatest philosopher. (We already know this – let's face it, some of his arguments are pretty feeble.) Or it may be that, as I suggested in my paper, he feels some loyalty to a tradition that his own Pyrrhonism has in some respects moved beyond. Since we know literally nothing about Sextus as an individual except that he was a doctor, and almost nothing about Pyrrhonism between Aenesidemus and Sextus, I don't think we are likely to be able to tell which of these factors (or which other factors) are at work here.

This is perhaps a good segue to Smith's comments. Smith finds (if I may put it this way) an inconsistency in my attitude towards consistency in Sextus. Sometimes I have worked hard to find him consistent where initial appearances may suggest that he is not. But in my paper on the Modes, he quotes me as saying that "I find positing inconsistency is often a small price to pay for textual fidelity" (179 in Smith, n.16 in my paper). He is probably right that my attitude towards this has

⁴ One significant point here, which I addressed in the paper, is that the Mode of Relativity in the Five Modes appears to be rather different from the appeals to relativity (and the Mode of Relativity itself, Sextus' Mode 8) in the Ten Modes – and that it looks as if Sextus himself is confused on this point.

shifted back and forth over the years, and indeed he cites a case where I reject an earlier view of my own that had found Sextus inconsistent (179). But I think I would stand by the comment just quoted – with an emphasis on the phrase “textual fidelity”. I agree that, other things being equal, we should want to find a way of reading Sextus (or most other philosophers⁵) as consistent if we can. But there are limits to this, and if the text clearly resists any consistent reading – as elements in both the Ten Modes and the Five Modes do, according to the reading I proposed in my paper – it is best to accept this, and maybe try to find an explanation of it.

This does not prevent one from giving a general picture of what the Ten Modes are supposed to achieve, and Smith gives an overview of this, appealing to distinctive features of skeptical reasoning (such as the use of the commemorative sign), that I find quite persuasive. I am not sure I would want to say, as he does (183), that the skeptic will accept that it may be rational to suspend judgment, and that one ought to suspend judgment. But he is very clear that this is meant in a non-dogmatic sense. I would prefer to put it by saying that the skeptic feels the force of the opposing considerations and finds no alternative but to suspend judgment. But perhaps there is, in the end, little difference between these formulations.

As for the Five Modes, I think Smith is right that we do not need to see them as working only in a group, and I did not mean to imply this. Sextus introduces them this way (and the parallel with Diogenes shows that this must have been a standard approach within Pyrrhonism); but his actual use of them is rather different. Here again, I like Smith’s general view of them as a set of skills to be used in various different contexts. I would, however, resist his idea that their use does not have to involve oppositions (186). It is true that Sextus says that the skeptical principle is “most of all [*malista*]” that of creating oppositions (*PH* 1.12), which seems to leave open the possibility that there might be occasional exceptions. But this idea is never followed up, and there seem to me to be several indications against it. First, Sextus immediately adds “for from this [that is, from the production of oppositions] we seem to end up not having doctrines”. Second, the skeptical ability itself is described as “oppositional” (*antithetikê*, *PH* 1.8). And third, as I mentioned earlier, the way we achieve suspension of judgment is said, in the introduction to the Modes themselves, to be by generating oppositions (*PH* 1.31). What we can say is that the ways in which oppositions can be created – and are created in Sextus’ works – are extremely varied, so that I don’t think this amounts to much of a restriction.

Just a few more points in response to Smith. I think we are in agreement that, given our limited information, it is hard to make sense of Sextus’ inclusion of Aenesidemus’ Eight Modes on causation. When I wrote the paper, I had not sufficiently appreciated the fact that Sextus *distinguishes* these from all the other Modes by not calling them (as he calls the others) “Modes of suspension of judgment”; Smith is quite right to draw attention to this. As for the Two Modes, I find his suggestion that these function as a preview of the structure of his treatment of the three parts of philosophy very interesting, and I was probably too quick in simply dismissing them as a compressed version of the Five Modes. Finally, I am not entirely convinced by Smith’s suggestion that Aenesidemus, like Sextus, may have described skepticism as an “ability”. But I take his point that the opening chapters of *Outlines* contain a number of elements that are plausible to see as deriving from Aenesidemus, so that it would be a mistake to draw too sharp a distinction between their approaches.

⁵ But perhaps not all. With Derrida, for example, this might be a fool’s errand. I would be inclined to put Nietzsche in the same category, at least some of the time, though I realize this is controversial.

Finally, a few remarks on Eichorn's paper. Eichorn too questions my use of the psychological/rational distinction: not so much the contrast itself, but my failure (and, in his view, most other scholars' failure) to separate *isostheneia* and *epochê* in considering this issue. But this is just the starting-point for a very broad survey of previous interpretations, leading to an extremely subtle, original and interesting interpretation of Sextus – which has the added benefit of showing how a great many earlier, seemingly rival interpretations all had something right about them. I will need to give all of this a lot more attention; but my initial impression is that his reading has a lot to be said for it⁶. In terms of his fourfold classification of positions regarding the psychological-versus-rational issue, I think – as my response above on this issue to Williams and Smith may suggest – that I may be closer to his position 2) and less firmly an adherent of his position 4) than he thinks. But this is perhaps a recent development on my part, and I would continue to insist that Sextus' engagement in rational argument is of a strictly non-dogmatic character. In any case, where I belong in the scheme is unimportant compared with what Eichorn does with it.

I quite agree with Eichorn that there is a dogmatic aspect to everyday, non-philosophical attitudes. I am not so sure how far Sextus agrees about this. It seems to me that he is ambivalent on this question, and I find this an important difficulty in his outlook. I have said a little more about this in another forthcoming paper⁷. I also wonder whether Sextus' orientation towards *ataraxia*, about which Eichorn says very little, fits entirely comfortably in his reconstruction. He offers some suggestive remarks about this in an extended footnote (n.30); but there is a limit to what can be covered in a single paper – and his already covers a huge amount of territory. Still, this is an issue on which I would be interested to hear more.

I fully appreciate Eichorn's point that any philosophically satisfying interpretation of Sextus will require going some way beyond his actual words, at least on some topics (197-8). But I can't help thinking that there may be an element of idealization in his interpretation, just as I have claimed there is in Williams' and Smith's. Maybe this is true of many or even most good interpretations of long-dead philosophers; as Williams says, "historical" versus "philosophical" is not strictly either/or (161). Nonetheless, I suspect I lean more towards the historical end of the spectrum, and less towards the philosophical end, than any of my three interlocutors in this volume. But perhaps that just means I'm too stuck in non-essential details, and that I don't work hard enough to figure out what the long-dead philosophers really meant to say.

References

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⁶ I am particularly interested that he draws on insights from Thompson Clarke in interpreting Sextus. I knew Thompson Clarke; I took two seminars from him as a graduate student, and I tried hard to understand him, since numerous philosophers I admired, including Barry Stroud, seemed to take him so seriously. I never succeeded, and for me Sextus – who I first encountered only after giving up on Clarke – felt like a welcome new start in thinking about skepticism, a clean break from what I had been wrestling with before. However, I must say that, to my surprise, I find Eichorn's use of Clarke in this context well motivated and quite helpful.

⁷ Bett forthcoming c.

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