

Scepticism in *Against the Ethicists*

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One of Richard Bett's main concerns in his new collection, *How to be a Pyrrhonist*,¹ is 'what we might call the *practice* of Pyrrhonism' (2019, ix). Central to that practice will be the attitude the Pyrrhonian sceptic takes to the good and the bad: whether they exist by nature, whether they are to be pursued and avoided, which things are good or bad by nature, etc. Ever since the appearance of his commentary on *Against the Ethicists* (*M XI*),² Bett has maintained that in that work, Sextus, at least in places, presents a 'distinctive position', at odds with the familiar epistemological and ethical position of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. For in the *Outlines*, Sextus is clear that the sceptic suspends judgment on such ethical questions (III.135): 'The Sceptics, then, seeing such anomaly in objects, suspend judgment as to whether anything is by nature good or bad, or generally to be done, here too refraining from dogmatic rashness; and they follow the observance of everyday life without holding opinions' (trans. Annas and Barnes). Yet in *M XI*, according to Bett, Sextus argues that the sceptic *accepts* that nothing is by nature either good or bad, and argues that this acceptance 'makes the sceptic's life greatly preferable to that of the dogmatist' (1997, xviii). *How to be a Pyrrhonist* repeats the claim: *M XI* 'tackles the subject of the good and the bad, and instead of attempting to induce suspension of judgment about whether there are any such things, it argues for the definite conclusion that there are *no* such things' (2019, 76; Bett's emphasis). This quotation comes from Bett's 2005 paper 'The Sign in the Pyrrhonian Tradition', reprinted in *How to be a Pyrrhonist* (chapter 4), but with a footnote added to the 2019 reprint stating that 'to my mind, no one has adequately responded to the crucial point in the present paragraph' (76 n.12), viz. that sections of *M XI* represent Sextus as arguing for the definite conclusion that nothing is good or bad by nature. And for good measure, Bett repeats the claim in the preface to his wonderful translation of *Against those in the Disciplines*³ (2018, 13), and in response to those who have attempted to

¹ Bett (2019).

² Bett (1997).

³ Bett (2018).

argue that Sextus' scepticism in *MXI* is the usual Pyrrhonian kind, states (13 n.24): 'I simply fail to see how the text can be read in this way'. In this short note I attempt to show that the crucial texts from *Against the Ethicists* do not suggest the 'distinctive position' that Bett finds in them, and hope to offer a rebuttal of that 'crucial point'.

The position that Sextus adopts in the *Outlines* is familiar enough. If the sceptic suspends judgment on the question of whether anything is by nature good or bad, that will be because the sceptic has weighed up the two sides of the question and found them evenly weighted, or equipollent. So the sceptic has examined the arguments that conclude the good and the bad exist by nature, and the arguments which conclude that the good and the bad don't exist by nature, and found them equally weighted. He thus suspends judgment. Our question is whether Sextus deviates from this picture in *MXI*. The crucial texts come in *MXI*.110-140. The heading for that long section is 'whether it is possible to live happily if one postulates things good and bad by nature' (Bett's own translation). Of course, the answer will be that such a dogmatic position will not bring happiness (§110), and instead, it is sceptics who will gain tranquillity if they 'make no determinations and suspend judgment' (§111).

The vocabulary is familiar from the sceptic's manifesto in *PHI*,⁴ notably the reference to suspension of judgment, and especially the locution 'make no determinations'. That locution is one of the sceptical phrases (*PHI* 197); Sextus tells us that when a sceptic says he makes no determinations, he means 'I now feel in such a way as neither to posit dogmatically nor to reject any of the things falling under this investigation' (trans. Annas and Barnes); in other words, that he has investigated both sides of the question and suspends judgment in the face of their equipollence. In the context of *MXI*, therefore, §111 leads us to expect that Sextus will be touting the psychological benefits of suspending judgment on the question of whether there is a good and bad by nature. And indeed, in the following sections we learn that tranquillity does not come from thinking things to be good by nature, and Sextus urges us to say 'that a certain thing is not more by nature to be chosen than to be avoided, nor more to be avoided than to be chosen' (§118; Bett's translation). Again, the locution 'no more' is straight out of the sceptical phrases from the *Outlines* (*PHI* 188-91): "No more this than that" makes clear our feelings; because of the equipollence of the opposed objects we end in equilibrium' (Annas and Barnes again). In other words, Sextus is urging us to say that things are no more by nature to be chosen than to be avoided: the classic suspension of judgment typical of a Pyrrhonian sceptic.

⁴ A fact noted by Bett in his commentary: 'The description of the sceptic here is precisely what one would expect from *PHI*' (130).

It is what Sextus says next that prompts Bett to argue that Sextus nonetheless deviates from his normal scepticism:

εἰ δὲ μὴ μᾶλλον τις λέγοι τι φύσει αἰρετόν ἢ φευκτόν μηδὲ μᾶλλον φευκτόν ἢ αἰρετόν, ἐκάστου τῶν ὑποπιπτόντων πρὸς τι πὼς ἔχοντος καὶ κατὰ διαφέροντας καιροὺς καὶ περιστάσεις νυνὶ μὲν αἰρετοῦ καθεστῶτος, νυνὶ δὲ φευκτοῦ, βιώσεται μὲν εὐδαιμόνως καὶ ἀταράχως, μήτε ἐπ' ἀγαθῷ ὡς ἀγαθῷ ἐπαιρόμενος μήτε ἐπὶ κακῷ ταπεινούμενος, τὸ μὲν κατ' ἀνάγκην συμβαῖνον γεννικῶς δεχόμενος, τοῦ δὲ κατὰ δόξαν ὀχληροῦ, καθ' ἣν κακὸν τι παρεῖναι ἢ ἀγαθὸν δοξάζεται, ἐλευθερούμενος. τοῦτο μὴν αὐτῷ παρέσται ἐκ τοῦ μηδὲν φύσει ἀγαθὸν ἢ κακὸν δοξάζειν. οὐκ ἄρα ἔνεστιν εὐδαιμόνως βιοῦν ἀγαθὰ τινα ἢ κακὰ ὑποστησάμενον.

But if someone should say that a certain thing is not more by nature to be chosen than to be avoided, nor more to be avoided than to be chosen, every event being in a certain state in relation to something else, and in accordance with differing states of affairs and circumstances, turning out as at one time to be chosen and at another time to be avoided, he will live happily and without disturbance, being neither uplifted at good as good, nor dejected at bad, nobly accepting what happens by necessity, but freed from the trouble associated with the opinion that something bad or good is present. Indeed, this will come to him from his not thinking anything good or bad by nature. Therefore it is not possible to live happily if one conceives certain things to be good or bad. (Bett's translation; penultimate sentence modified.)

In the antecedent of the conditional in the first sentence, Sextus imagines someone (the sceptic) who suspends judgment on whether there is anything by nature to be avoided or pursued and who instead says that anything which is to be chosen or avoided is so because of circumstance or context, and not because of its nature (this is meant to describe the mind-set of the Pyrrhonist, who might well accept that something is to be avoided or pursued, but without the concomitant belief that the thing in question is *of such a nature* as to be avoided or pursued). So far, so good. Such a person would indeed be 'freed from the troubles issuing from believing that things are good or bad by nature', since they suspend judgment on the question. It is in the following sentence that Bett sees the new and unusual kind of sceptical position creeping in: 'τοῦτο μὴν αὐτῷ παρέσται ἐκ τοῦ μηδὲν φύσει ἀγαθὸν ἢ κακὸν δοξάζειν'. Bett translates: 'Indeed, this will come to him from his thinking nothing good or bad by nature', and takes 'μηδὲν φύσει ἀγαθὸν ἢ κακὸν' as specifying the content of a *doxa* that is being

recommended to us by the sceptic. This is indeed a radical departure for a Pyrrhonian sceptic: he is to have a *doxa*, based on argumentation, to the effect that the good and the bad by nature do not exist! However, as Bett reminds us in the commentary, Jim Hankinson had previously pointed out⁵ that the Greek is ambiguous between ‘this will come to be present in him from *not* thinking *anything* is good or bad by nature’ (as I have translated it) and ‘this will in fact come to be present in him from thinking *nothing* is good or bad by nature’ (as Bett translated it). Since we are in the context of the familiar conceptual scheme from the *Outlines* (with references to ‘suspension of judgment’, ‘determining nothing’, and ‘no more this than that’), it seems perfectly respectable to suppose that Sextus is here saying that the way to achieve the kind of tranquillity everyone wants is to *avoid believing* that anything is good or bad by nature, rather than taking the active view that *nothing* is good or bad by nature.⁶

So far, then, we have not seen a sufficient case against interpreting Sextus in *M XI.118* as espousing a different sort of scepticism from that of the *Outlines*. But Bett’s case does not rest on this passage alone. He also detects the sceptical *acceptance* of there being nothing good or bad by nature in two later sections, namely §130 and §140. We shall have to look at both. I hope to show that the way Sextus expresses himself strongly suggests that in neither place is he expressing a sort of negative dogmatism whereby the sceptic actively *believes* that there is nothing good or bad by nature.

§130 comes after a lengthy argument (starting back in §119, immediately after our last extract) to the effect that desiring things which you think are good by nature will not in fact bring you happiness, but will cause your psychology all sorts of problems, not just during your pursuit of the things you take to be goods, but when you finally get them too. The passage ends this way:

λόγου δὲ παραστήσαντος, ὅτι οὐδὲν τούτων φύσει ἐστὶν ἀγαθὸν ἢ φύσει κακόν, λύσις
ἔσται τῆς ταραχῆς καὶ εἰρηναῖος ἡμᾶς ἐκδέξεται βίος.

⁵ Hankinson (1994) p. 56-7.

⁶ Bett says that this reading renders the sentence ‘absurdly redundant’ (commentary ad loc, 137). But this is because Bett takes the *τοῦτο* in our sentence to refer to the ‘freeing’ mentioned in the previous sentence; it would indeed be odd to say that the way to free yourself from believing that things are good or bad by nature is not to believe things to be good or bad by nature! But the *τοῦτο* surely refers to living *εὐδαιμόνως καὶ ἀταράχως*, and what we are being told is that avoiding believing that anything is good or bad by nature is the way to achieve *that*.

But when reason has established that none of these things is by nature good or by nature bad, there will be a release from disturbance and a peaceful life will await us. (Bett's translation)

What does 'λόγου δὲ παραστήσαντος' mean? Bett interprets Sextus as saying that for the person who thinks that there are things which are good by nature (which he then pursues), and bad by nature (which he then avoids), the remedy is *acceptance* of the opposite view, that nothing is by nature good or bad, and that will release him from the disturbance. But is this the right interpretation of the verb *παρίστημι*? Is that how Sextus uses the verb in his writings? The answer to this is 'no'. It is a very common verb in Sextus, across all his works, and it is a verb that Sextus loves to use for proposing a *counterargument* to a dogmatist's argument for a particular position. In *PH II 21*, for instance, when Sextus begins his discussion of the criterion of truth, he explains to us that he will take each of the three meanings that the dogmatists discern of the term 'criterion', and ἕκαστον τούτων ἐπελθόντες ἐν μέρει τὴν ἀκαταληψίαν αὐτοῦ παραστήσομεν. What Sextus means, of course, is not that the sceptic will actively *believe* that the criterion is inapprehensible in any of those senses. Rather, Sextus is describing the sceptic's counterarguments to the dogmatists' claims of the existence of the criterion; the result of offering these counterarguments will of course be suspension of judgment about the criterion, as he says at the start of the discussion in *PH II.18* and again at the end in *PH II.79*. Annas and Barnes translate *παραστήσομεν* at *PH II.21* as 'we shall establish', but in the context of *PH II* this does not mean 'establish so as to recommend for belief', but rather just 'offer an argument in favour of'.⁷ (See also *PH II.173*; *III.51*; *III.85*; etc.) This use of the verb is not just found in *PH*. The phrase 'ὡς παραστήσομεν' and its variants (with first person singular, or with *κάθως*, etc.) occur *dozens* of times across *M VII*, *VIII*, *IX*, and *X*, *always* in the context of Sextus offering a *counterargument* to a dogmatist's claim, and *never* in the context of stating something the Pyrrhonian sceptic will believe. The same locution occurs in *M XI* itself, with no suggestion that it has a different colour or means anything different (§§72, 188, 211, 239).

So could Sextus be using the verb *παρίστημι* in his usual way at *M XI.130*? Would it make sense to interpret him that way? It fits the context perfectly. Sextus has just been saying that the belief that the dogmatists have that there is something good or bad by nature will lead to severe problems, and a definite lack of tranquillity. If they want to eliminate this

⁷ LSJ (s.v. *παρίστημι*) give 'set before the mind', 'propose', which seems to me to fit Sextus' usage very well.

disturbance from their lives, what they should do – if they are to follow the sceptic’s lead – is pay attention to the counterarguments, the ones which argue that there is nothing by nature good or bad. Having been in the grip of the picture according to which there *are* things which are good and bad by nature, they need a healthy dose of argumentation arguing the opposite. Suspension of judgment will follow, as will tranquillity. Hence Sextus says: ‘But when reason has established that none of these things is by nature good or by nature bad, there will be a release from disturbance and a peaceful life will await us’. We might paraphrase: ‘Someone who is convinced that there are things which are good or bad by nature needs to set before their mind the arguments that there is nothing which is good or bad by nature, so that they suspend judgment on the issue. Tranquillity will follow.’ The Pyrrhonian remedy to someone who thinks there are things that are good or bad by nature should precisely be the establishing of the counterarguments. Not the *acceptance* of those counterarguments, mind you, but just the laying out of them. Precisely this is the usual force of the verb *παρίστημι* in Sextus. What Sextus prescribes for the ailing dogmatist is exactly what we would expect him to prescribe.

What now of §140? This paragraph occurs at the end of a long discussion where Sextus ‘consider three ways in which a dogmatist might be expected to try to mitigate the disturbance experienced by the person who believes that things are by nature good or bad’ (Bett, 153). Sextus finishes up that discussion by saying:

μόνως οὖν ἔσται φυγεῖν ταύτην, εἰ ὑποδείξαιμεν τῷ ταραττομένῳ κατὰ τὴν τοῦ κακοῦ φυγὴν ἢ κατὰ τὴν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ δίωξιν, ὅτι οὔτε ἀγαθόν τι φύσει ἔστι οὔτε κακόν.

It will only be possible to avoid this, then, if we show to the person who is disturbed on account of his avoidance of the bad or his pursuit of the good, that there is not anything either good or bad by nature. (Bett’s translation)

Once again, Sextus is considering what to say to the person who is in the grip of the picture according to which there are good or bad things by nature. What the sceptic needs to do is ‘show’ (*ὑποδείξαιμεν*) them that there is not anything either good or bad by nature. Once again, Bett takes Sextus to be presenting a kind of scepticism which involves urging someone to *accept* that there is not anything good or bad by nature. What are we to make of this verb, *ὑποδείκνυμι*? Is this a verb which indicates endorsement of a position, when used by Sextus? The answer, again, is no. Take the following passage from *MIX.277*, where once again, we are talking about a sceptic’s counterargument to a dogmatic position: καὶ μὴν εἰ ἔστι τι τὸ

πάσχον, ἤτοι κατὰ πρόσθεσιν πάσχει ἢ κατὰ ἀφαίρεσιν ἢ κατὰ ἑτεροίωσιν καὶ μεταβολήν· οὔτε δὲ πρόσθεσις τις ἔστιν οὔτε ἀφαίρεσις οὔτε μεταβολή καὶ ἑτεροίωσις, ὡς ὑποδείξομεν. In Bett's translation:⁸ 'Then again, if what is affected is something, it is affected either by way of addition or by way of subtraction or by way of alteration and change; but there is no addition or subtraction or alteration and change, as we will show'. Sextus is saying that the sceptic has arguments that there is no addition etc. to oppose to the dogmatist's arguments that there is. In fact, Bett's preferred translation of ὑποδείκνυμι is 'indicate' (as is Annas and Barnes', in their translation of *PH*), in the sense of 'bring something to our attention', or 'describe'. It is clearly not a word which is intended to express *endorsement* of the view that is being shown, indicated, or described, as we can see from the example of *M IX*, where no one is tempted to see anything other than the normal suspension of judgment.⁹

The meaning of §140 is thus the same §130: the cure for the poor dogmatist who believes that there are things which are good or bad by nature is the reckoning of the counterarguments that there are no such things. Where should the dogmatist turn for such arguments? Look no further than *Against the Ethicists*, §§42-109. When at §§130 and 140 Sextus tells the dogmatist to consider the arguments that there is nothing by nature good or bad, he is doing nothing less than encouraging the dogmatist to turn back a few pages, and reread the sceptic's counterarguments against the ethicists. Thus, Bett's fascinating identification of a different kind of scepticism at work in parts of *M XI* proves to be chimerical. The practice of Pyrrhonism does not, after all, require us to believe that nothing is good or bad by nature.

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⁸ Bett (2012).

⁹ For the closeness between the two verbs, it is worth noting that in *PH* III.89 and *M IX*.312, passages which are doublets of each other, Sextus uses the expression 'ὡς παραστήσω' in the first and 'ὡς δείξομεν' in the second.

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