

Skepticism as Philosophy: A Reply to Richard Bett's *How to be a Pyrrhonist*

Katja Maria Vogt

Columbia University

Email: kmv@katjavogt.com

What to say if—as presumably applies to Pyrrhonian skeptics—you have nothing to say?¹ Why care whether skepticism is different from other philosophies? What is involved in living as a skeptic? What kind of self has the skeptic? Can *we* be ancient skeptics? In *How to be a Pyrrhonist* [HTBP], Richard Bett asks these and related questions.

Bett's replies to these questions are cautious, if not to say pessimistic. This may seem surprising, given Bett's long-standing commitment to interpreting and exploring Pyrrhonian skepticism. Skepticism, as reconstructed in HTBP, is not an approach we could or plausibly would embrace. It is, indeed, not even an instance of philosophy. Along the way, Bett comments on an Academic skeptic who wrote ten books about Pyrrhonism. Bett says this “would be a lot to write unless one saw something valuable and congenial in one's topic” (38). Bett's own research—easily the equivalent of ten books—would seem to be a lot too, unless he saw something valuable and congenial in his topic. Bett clearly respects Sextus as a sophisticated author, and perhaps this suffices to ascribe value to Sextus' work. But as I shall argue, if we take our cue from Bett's own work, we can find more value, perhaps even congeniality, in Pyrrhonian skepticism.

I begin in section 1 with a sketch of Bett's proposals in a set of related chapters of HTBP, chapters 1, 2, 7, 9, and 12. My moderately optimistic defense of the skeptics starts where Bett's pessimism runs deepest, the question of whether the skeptics are at all philosophers (sections 2 and 3). The sense in which they are, combined with Bett's earlier work on the metaphysical ancestry of Sextus' Pyrrhonism, opens up new avenues for appreciation of skeptical philosophy (sections 4 and 5). HTBP is exceptionally nuanced, the work of an author who knows Sextus' writings in and out and has thought deeply and carefully about them. My response, accordingly, does not aim to identify passages that Bett hasn't

¹ I am grateful for comments to Qian Cao, Jens Haas, Natalie Hannan, Christiana Olfert, Máté Veres, and Justin Vlasits.

considered—quite likely, there are none. Rather, I aim to uncover resources in his own work on skepticism that permit a more positive assessment.

1. How to be a Pyrrhonist

Bett starts out with the famous first sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*—all human beings by nature desire to know. The skeptics, as Bett argues, are outliers. They are unlike philosophers in the literal sense, lovers of wisdom, and they aren't even lovers of knowledge in the sense in which we all are. Rather than knowledge, the skeptics want freedom from turmoil, *ataraxia*. The goal of *ataraxia* motivates their distinctive activity of putting together opposing appearances and thoughts, thereby generating suspension of judgment (*PH* 1.8). On Bett's reconstruction, this activity does not count as genuine inquiry.

In Chapter 1, Bett entertains an intriguing idea. Sextus, he argues, deliberately uses variation in how he understands key terms, including “philosophy.” At times, skeptics are called philosophers. At other times, philosophy is what others do, to the effect that skeptics are not even philosophers. Bett suggests that this may be intentional. The takeaway for readers is suspension of judgment on what philosophy even is. In Chapter 2, Bett examines *Outlines* 1.210–41. Sextus discusses nearby philosophies, only to tell the reader that in each case the difference runs deep: all others put forward doctrines. Bett notes that Sextus refers remarkably little to Pyrrho, Timon, and Aenesidemus, as it were removing all appearance of ancestry. Why, he asks, is it so important to Sextus to present his skepticism as singular? Bett puts forward a hypothesis. Sextus wants to say more than that skepticism differs from other philosophies. Really, skepticism is *not philosophy* (42–4). Notably, this proposal is stronger than the thought that Sextus invites us to question what philosophy even is. It presupposes that philosophy is a fairly unified phenomenon, one that Sextus opts out of.

In Chapters 7 and 9, Bett turns to questions about selfhood and agency. The skeptic, he argues, has only a “lightweight” self, lacking in depth of commitment (143). The skeptic is not fully an agent, in the sense that action theory and ethics tend to stipulate—someone whose concerns, priorities, and perspectives on the world shape her choices and actions (179). The life of a skeptic and its ethical outlook, Bett argues, is not viable for us today (180). First, why should we view tranquility as the overriding value, as (on Bett's reading) Sextus' skeptic does? Second, why should we assume that the upshot of skeptical oppositions in ethics—that nothing is good or bad in itself—comes with *ataraxia* rather than with “existential angst” (180)?

In Chapter 12, Bett says that both Plato and Aristotle “got into trouble with the march of history” (226). Perhaps we can avoid their fate—of, presumably, being proven wrong—by avoiding definite views altogether. According to Sextus, tranquility follows “like a shadow” upon suspension of judgment, which the skeptic can generate on any question whatsoever. Can we take this seriously? Bett does not think so. In his words, we “know too much” (183-4). Progress in science makes adoption of the skeptic outlook obsolete. Bett’s example is climate change. Sextus’ skepticism can seem to suggest that we ought to adduce appearances and arguments of equal weight on both sides, to the effect that we suspend judgment and become tranquil. If this is what skepticism looks like, Bett’s pessimistic assessment should be welcome.² We may not want to concede that, as long as there are people who deny the existence or dangers of climate change, to the effect that one might put together opposing arguments and generate tranquility, all must be well. And yet, we may ask: why should we take Pyrrhonism as seriously as Bett does, if this is its main upshot?

2. Philosophy

Consider again the first sentence of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*: “All human beings desire by nature to know.” If we approach the first sentence of the *Metaphysics* naively, it sounds celebratory, as if Aristotle talked about a worthy desire conspicuous in all humankind. If we come to the *Metaphysics* as readers of Plato, its first sentence comes across as a polemic against Plato and the role of Socrates in some dialogues. Namely, Plato and Socrates regularly make it seem that lots of people *don’t* desire knowledge. These people love the thought of being wise. But once that self-image crumbles in the face of Socrates’ questioning, they prefer to be on their way.

Presumably, the beginning of the *Metaphysics* contains a reply. According to Aristotle, our love of vision—not our behavior in conversation—provides evidence for our desire for knowledge. Eyesight is or provides us with *gnôsis* (*Met* A.1 980a24-27 and 981b10-13).³ This *gnôsis* is not knowledge in the elevated sense of *epistêmê*, but for Aristotle it is some kind of knowledge. That is, our love of vision testifies to desire for knowledge, insofar as vision *is* a kind of knowledge. But none of the philosophical interlocutors of the skeptics—Plato, Stoics, Epicureans—accepts that perception is knowledge.⁴ For the skeptics, sense perception is part

² Arguably, Carneades’ Academic skepticism permits that we act on our best evidence (Vogt, 2012b).

³ Gasser-Wingate, MS.

⁴ For the Epicureans, sense perceptions are true, but not thereby knowledge.

of the ordinary way of life they adopt. They co-opt the Stoic account of the natural acquisition of the abilities to perceive and to think (*PH* 1.23-4).⁵ This account says not only that we come to be able to perceive and think by nature—it also says that we are naturally attached to these abilities.⁶ This love of vision, however, is neither here nor there with respect to the question of whether the skeptics are philosophers.

One ancient conception of philosophical inquiry is exemplified by Aristotle, and arguably, a version of this conception has become prevalent in the Western tradition.⁷ The author lays out and defends a proposal on a given question. Notably, authors do not merely lay out a given view. They also attend to arguments and views formulated by others. Aristotle argues that we become better philosophers if we “puzzle” through problems.⁸ We should think things through “*pros amphotera*,” by examining the arguments on both sides of an issue.⁹ Suppose today we expect something like this: a proposal, defended by reference to puzzles and arguments for and against diverging positions.

By this standard, alas, not many ancient philosophers other than Aristotle count as philosophers.¹⁰ Socrates and Plato attend to objections and a range of views, but they don’t write treatises where they lay out positive proposals.¹¹ Any number of early Greek philosophers put forward positive proposals. But the surviving material does not have the kind of argumentative structure that comes with explicit attention to the views of others.

So far, we are looking at three modes of doing philosophy: one where positive proposals take up most of the effort, one where puzzling through arguments for and against various views is most prominent, and one that combines both approaches. Let me suggest that there is also (at least) a fourth, fifth, and sixth mode. The fourth mode consists in the retracing of views of an inspiring figure and devising a philosophy that captures ideals associated with this

⁵ Vogt (1998), ch. 3.

⁶ This is the starting-point of the Stoic theory of *oikeiōsis*; cf. DL 7.85-6, Hierocles 1.34-9, 51-7, 2.1-9, 9.3-10, 11.14-18.

⁷ Even with respect to Aristotle, some qualifications may be in order. (i) Presumably, Aristotle too wrote dialogues. (ii) Aristotle’s ideal thinker, God, is someone who continually thinks the same thoughts, and the highest kind of human contemplation emulates this; a capacious notion of philosophy could include this kind of thinking (cf. Olfert 2015). (iii) A prominent reading of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* focuses on its “seeking” nature: Aristotle starts out several times over to get clear about “the science we are seeking” (Frede and Patzig 1988). (iv) Though the aim to “discover the truth” is often considered constitutive of inquiry in discussions of skepticism, this is not always Aristotle’s primary aim. For example, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle takes it that we already have relevant truths available; alas, they are “true but not clear” (*NE* VI.1). Here clarification of truths, rather than their discovery, is the aim.

⁸ Cf. *Metaphysics* B 1, 995a24-995b4. Laks (2009).

⁹ *Topics* 1.2 101a34, VI.6 145b16-20; cf. *Met.* B.4 1000a5ff. Against a traditional view, defended for example by Brunschwig (1984/5), Bolton (2019) argues that Aristotle’s concern with arguments for both sides cannot be purely “gymnastic”; it must include concern for the truth.

¹⁰ Moreover, ancient philosophers seem to invoke a broader notion when they locate philosophy’s beginnings in India, or among the Magi, or the Egyptian priests (cf. DL I and the fragments of Aristotle’s *On Philosophy*).

¹¹ Bett calls Plato an exception (8). This may not do justice to Plato’s prominence and his far-reaching influence.

figure. Presumably, some Academics, Epicureans, and Stoics fit that description. The fifth mode devises revisionist linguistic and epistemic practices. Ordinary ways of talking and relating to the world, the thought goes, have metaphysical or epistemological implications that may be unfounded. The Cyrenaics, whom Sextus considers “nearby” (*PH* 1.209, 215), pursue this approach. They create a non-assertoric form of speech that merely lays open how the world appears to them. The sixth mode of doing philosophy is dialectical insofar as positions evolve over time, in several rounds of responses to other positions that are developed contemporaneously. Arguably, some debates in today’s philosophy are only comprehensible as conversations of this sort, and the same applies to significant chunks of Hellenistic philosophy, most perspicuously, Stoic and Academic thought.¹²

If we ask whether the skeptics are philosophers, I submit, we should be aware of this range. The upshot is similar to Bett’s hypothesis that Sextus aims to generate suspension of judgment on what philosophy is. The difference between Bett’s hypothesis and my proposal is just this: I argue that, in not holding a definite view about the nature of philosophy, we are getting something *right*. We acknowledge genuine diversity.

3. Philosophers by Temperament

In Plato’s dialogues, some interlocutors seem philosophically inclined, for example, Glaucon and Adeimantus in the *Republic*. One way in which this manifests is that they are troubled by objections, and as long as they are, they cannot rest. This is one way to care about the truth: one would like to find out how things are, because one is perturbed by considerations that pull in different directions.

Other figures in Plato’s dialogues are not philosophical in this manner. For example, Socrates’ interlocutors in the *Ion* and *Euthyphro* are by no means disturbed by appearances that pull away from views they hold. Ion thinks that qua rhapsode he is a general and, indeed, anything he is able to sing about. As Socrates points out, this is decidedly not how it seems to others, or else they would appoint him as general (*Ion* 541b-d). Euthyphro holds that he ought to bring charges against his own father, which no one else thinks (*Euthyphro* 5d-e). Accordingly, there seems to be a minimal notion of “being philosophical” which appeals to a person’s tendency to be perturbed by opposite considerations.

At the beginning of the *Outlines*, Sextus distinguishes among three groups (*PH* 1.1-4). Arguably, Sextus does not offer an exhaustive division of humankind. Rather, he distinguishes

¹² Vogt (2013).

among three responses to inquiry, including philosophical inquiry. Among those who engage in philosophical inquiry, then, some take themselves to discover the truth, others take the truth to be inapprehensible, and yet others—the skeptics—keep on searching (*PH* 1.1-4). This is how Sextus describes skeptics: they set out to philosophize because they are in turmoil, and would like to settle what is true and false (*PH* 1.12). The three groups Sextus distinguishes are all philosophers, in the weak sense that they care about discrepancies and considerations that pull in different directions. Hence there is a fourth group that Sextus doesn't address here, of those who are *not* disturbed by countervailing considerations to begin with.

The Academics are often described as embracing a Socratic commitment to a life guided by reason.¹³ A version of this applies, I submit, also to Pyrrhonian skeptics, though Socrates is not invoked as ancestor. When Bett discusses the Pyrrhonian aim of *ataraxia*, he says that, if it turned out that Prozac was able to generate tranquility reliably, the skeptics might just as well go for it (146). Let's assume, for the sake of the argument, that some drugs were available in antiquity that generate a moderately unperturbed state of mind—not, perhaps, a perfectly unperturbed one, but skeptical inquiry also generates no more than *metriopatheia*, moderate freedom from turmoil (*PH* 1.25-6). Why would Sextus not recommend such drugs? I suggest that this is not Sextus' proposal because skepticism targets a specific set of people, those who are philosophically inclined. What disturbs them relates distinctively to the truth. Perhaps a drug may ease their turmoil, but it doesn't address its root.

4. Conflicting Appearances

If my sketch so far is compelling, then Bett's two dimensions of Sextus' skepticism need to be supplemented by a third one. In addition to tranquility and oppositional activity, there are also oppositional phenomena. In other words, the skeptics do not just *put together* opposing appearances and thoughts. Prior to that, they *encounter* opposing appearances and thoughts. Because they are philosophically inclined, this causes turmoil, and this turmoil is distinctively truth-related.

In *HTBP*, Bett focuses on the skepticism of Sextus' *Outlines*, setting aside all traces of earlier Pyrrhonism that figure in Sextus' work. This is presented as a means of simplification, perhaps because the book's chapters were originally written as self-standing papers, and one can only do so much in one paper. But even Book I of the *Outlines*, where Sextus is careful to present an entirely undogmatic skepticism, would fall apart without the Modes of

¹³ Cooper (2004), Vogt (2013).

Aenesidemus (§§31-165), which take up more than half of the text: 134 out of 241 paragraphs. The Modes of Aenesidemus are not “merely” forms of argument. They come with a large body of material, presumably put together by several writers, material that flags differences one encounters in the world—differences in sense perception, in custom and religion, and in theories.

Oposing phenomena perturb the skeptics and they hope to get rid of this turmoil—this, Sextus says, is the *archê*, the cause and starting point, of skepticism (*PH* 1.12). If skeptical inquiry was mere production of oppositions, it would be disingenuous. As the climate change example illustrates, it can seem willful that one puts together oppositions, aiming at tranquility *rather than* truth. Skeptical activity can only be saved from the charge of being willful—perhaps even ill intended—if and when phenomena pull in different directions.

The “if and when” in my formulation involves a concession to Bett’s view. Progress in science, Bett argues, makes universal inquiry and suspension of judgment impossible or disingenuous. Bett’s examples, however, permit an alternative description. A contemporary version of skepticism, I submit, would have to expand the domains, called “disciplines,” that Sextus discusses in *M* 1-6. In antiquity, these disciplines comprise grammar, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astrology, and music. Setting aside astrology, these are fields where in antiquity progress was already such that there were established practices that informed people’s lives. Add to this the kind of medicine that Pyrrhonians seem to have accepted, where doctors adhere to appearances without adducing explanations or defending theories of health and illness.¹⁴ By today, the range of fields that permit adherence to established practices has significantly grown. Why should a skeptic today not “work with” the periodic table, switch on the light, and so on, to use some of Bett’s examples, and relate to chemistry, physics, and so on, in the way in which Sextus’ skeptics relate to arithmetic and geometry?

To return to Bett’s examples in environmental ethics, a contemporary skeptic may go along with, say, reducing her usage of plastic. The appearance of large quantities of plastic in the oceans and the food chain can play the same role that, in medicine, the appearance of a wound plays. Here phenomena don’t pull in different directions: the plastic abounds, just as the wound stares one in the face. In both cases, one wants it gone or lessened, in the skeptical “metriopathic” manner: one suffers only moderately because one does not endorse the view that the current condition is bad by nature. It appears such as to be gotten rid of, however, and one follows whatever path seems viable to achieve this. And as Sextus emphasizes, the skeptics don’t aim to do away with appearances (*PH* 1.19-20). This is compatible, however,

¹⁴ For present purposes, I set aside the differences between medicine and the “disciplines.”

with being struck by conflicting appearances in ways that disquiet the skeptic. For example, one day it seems to the skeptic that nothing but drastic changes in lifestyle can “save us.” Another day she reads Dale Jamieson’s book and it seems to her that nothing whatsoever can save us, because it is too late.¹⁵ Yet another day it seems to her that innovative, biodegradable materials may do the trick, and so on. Bett’s own writing suggests that the world is such as to pull us in these different directions.

In sum, *M* 1-6 suggest that skepticism can admit sophisticated practices, guided by fields of study. This is compatible with open questions in these fields. It is also compatible with deeper, metaphysical puzzles.

5. Metaphysical Ancestry

Bett emphasizes that Sextus presents his skepticism as if it had no ancestry. And yet, this ancestry is hidden in plain sight. *Outlines* I gives pride of place to earlier modes of argument that Sextus does not purport to have developed himself. Sextus also includes the so-called formulae, such as “I determine nothing” and “no more this than that,” skeptical utterances inherited from earlier Pyrrhonians.

In earlier work, Bett argued that Pyrrho, to the best of our knowledge, was not a skeptic. Instead, Pyrrho held a metaphysical view, namely that the nature of things is indeterminate. According to the only detailed report about his philosophy, Pyrrho asked three questions. (1) What are things like by nature? (2) In what way ought we to be disposed toward them? (3) What will be the result for those who are so disposed?¹⁶

In response to the first question, Pyrrho says: “... things are equally indifferent and unstable and indeterminate.” These three terms—*adiaphora kai astathmêta kai anepikrita*—could also be rendered epistemically, as if Pyrrho said that all things are “indifferentiable and unmeasurable and undecidable.”¹⁷ However, Pyrrho is reported to answer the question what things are like by nature, and not the question of whether things are epistemically accessible. Pyrrho’s reply to (2) confirms the metaphysical reading of (1): “For this reason”—and this reason must be that the world has a certain metaphysics—“neither our sensations nor our opinions tell the truth or lie.” The world is indeterminate, but our sensations and beliefs pertain to capture determinate states of affairs. Accordingly, they are not even truth-apt: they

¹⁵ Jamieson (2014).

¹⁶ Here and throughout the next paragraph: Aristocles, *On Philosophy* VIII, tr. Bett 2000.

¹⁷ Svavarsson (2012).

are not such as to either be true or false. “For this reason, then, we should not trust them, but should be without opinions and without inclinations and without wavering, saying about each single thing that it no more is than is not or both is and is not or neither is and is not.” The normative upshot is that we should not hold any beliefs and that we should use formulations along the lines of “*ou mallon*” with respect to everything. “The result will be... first speechlessness and then freedom from worry.”

Pyrrho is often taken to be an isolated figure. But arguably, this assessment requires revision. Instead we can see Pyrrho as a contributor to a prominent debate in ancient metaphysics. Conflicting appearances are the starting point of any number of philosophical approaches. This matters, because it suggests that the constructing of oppositions is not a willful practice—it is motivated by perplexing ways in which the world strikes us. Consider examples from Plato's *Theaetetus*. The same wind is blowing. One of us feels cold, the other doesn't (152b). At a given moment the sea looks white to one cognizer and grey to another cognizer, be that a human or an animal cognizer (156d-e). The wine tastes sweet to healthy Socrates and bitter to sick Socrates (159c-e). Compared to four dice, six dice have the properties “more” and “1.5 times as many”; compared to twelve dice six dice have the properties “less” and “half as many” (154c). While different sets of laws can be more or less beneficial in the long run, what is just now for each state is that which seems just to it; the laws that are in force right now are the laws that have normative power (167c). These examples consider perceptual, affective, quasi-mathematical (“many” or “half”), and normative properties. In all these domains, the world strikes us in conflicting ways.

In the *Theaetetus*, these examples are explored in the context of reconstructing relativism, not as part of a view Plato himself endorses. But they are examined with great seriousness. Scholars ask to what extent Plato's own metaphysics of becoming requires versions of the ideas he explores with respect to relativism.¹⁸ Conflicting appearances, it seems, have linguistic and epistemic upshots, ones that resonate with upshots Plato entertains in his own voice in other dialogues.¹⁹ Because nothing is just one thing, Socrates says that the verb “to be” must be abolished (157b-c). As the conversation in the *Theaetetus* proceeds, it becomes increasingly clear that relativism requires a metaphysics according to which there are no stable objects or properties, and no identifiable acts of perception. What we ordinarily call an act of perception is “no more perception than not” (182d-e). If a metaphysics of flux

¹⁸ Burnyeat (1990).

¹⁹ *Protagoras* 339a-348a, *Republic* 478d-e, 479d.

holds, we cannot ascribe any properties to anything. As Plato puts this, “thus” and “not thus” cannot be used if things are in motion as the Heracliteans have it (183b).

For now, this sketch suffices. It aims to remind the reader that attention to opposing phenomena is an important dimension of Greek metaphysics. Pyrrho addresses phenomena that occupy some of the best ancient metaphysicians. Attention to revisionist epistemic and linguistic norms is part and parcel of these preoccupations. Consider a story that we know hardly anything about, and yet we have reason to believe that it happened: Pyrrho met with Indian philosophers. Presumably, he encountered proponents of the Sarvāstivāda school. One theme that this school discusses with its interlocutors is the existence or non-existence of phenomena, *dharmas*.²⁰ Relevant texts work, for example, with exercises of the imagination. The addressee is asked to imagine herself “sitting on a chair which has nothing supporting it. No floor, no house, no earth, no planet [...] And is not the chair made up of many non-chair elements? Fabric, wood, the chair designer, the furniture maker?”²¹ In other words, Pyrrho seems to have encountered modes of thought that aim to generate and sustain states of mind different from those we ordinarily inhabit. Bett ascribes this dimension to Pyrrho, who seems to have attempted to “strip off the human” (150).

A version of this, I submit, survives in Sextus, and not merely in his quotes of early Pyrrhonian formulae. Rather, Sextus’ skeptics don’t make assertions. They report states of mind, in utterances of the form “X appears Y to me now” (*PH* 1.4), avoiding the verb “to be” and indexing utterances to the speaker and context.²² But asserting what seems to us is an ordinary practice. Only ongoing theoretical effort can counteract it, and arguably this work is a *bona fide* way of doing philosophy.

The fact that Sextus’ skeptics undertake this effort betrays that tranquility is not the only mental state they pursue. Rather, they pursue mental states that capture a highly reflective outlook. This outlook, of course, is not dogmatic. It does not come with the view that things *are* indeterminate. But it is a response to the pervasiveness of oppositional appearances. The intellectually honest response, it would seem, is to keep an open mind on whether things are indeterminate or determinate.

If my arguments are compelling, Sextus’ skeptics are philosophers, and not merely by temperament. Like Plato and Socrates, they explore arguments for and against different views. Like Academics and others, they seem inspired by ideals and devise a philosophy that

²⁰ Sloane (MS, 10). I am grateful to Don Sloane for sharing his MS on “Pyrrho and Calamus.” My brief remarks about the Sarvāstivāda school are owed to his analysis.

²¹ Sloane (MS, 10).

²² Vogt (1998, ch 2).

approximates them. Like Pyrrho, the Cyrenaics, and (as far as I can see) ancient Indian thinkers, they counteract mental attitudes that seem metaphysically unwarranted—though the skeptics don't hold a view about the way the world is, the world they inhabit pervasively strikes them in conflicting ways. And like Stoics and Academics, Sextus writes in ways that reference a conversation, to the effect that a full picture of his skepticism arises when we envisage it in dialogue with others.

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