

Katja Maria Vogt, *Skepsis und Lebenspraxis. Das pyrrhonische Leben ohne Meinungen*, Symposium 111, Freiburg und München: Alber Verlag (1998).

Skepticism and Action: Pyrrhonian Life Without Belief – Abstract

This book responds to a long-standing question about Pyrrhonian skepticism: whether the skeptics have any kind of beliefs. I address this topic in three steps. First, the question about the skeptic's belief asks what goes on in the skeptic's *mind*. Things look a certain way to the skeptics; skeptics think about things and they move through the world without, for example, bumping into walls when they leave a room. I argue that this kind of mental life does not involve beliefs, understood as judgments or truth-claims. Second, the question about the skeptic's beliefs concerns *language*. Assertions are often thought of as the linguistic counterpart of beliefs: something is said to be the case. If the skeptic's mental life looks as I reconstruct it, the skeptics need a non-assertoric language and, I argue, it is a substantial part of the skeptical project to develop this language. This side of skepticism has not received much attention in earlier publications; it is a crucial part of my analysis that the skeptics' practices are importantly linguistic practices. Third, the question about the skeptic's beliefs is a question about *agency*. Action is often thought to involve judgments or beliefs, about what is valuable or to be done on the one hand, but also about the context in which an action takes place and the situation to which it responds. If the skeptics do not form beliefs, how can they act?

The book consists of three parts, which address skeptical *belief*, *language*, and *action*. I explore these issues through a discussion of the works of Sextus Empiricus, the only Pyrrhonian who wrote extensively and whose work survives.

Chapter 1: Refraining from Dogmata

I argue that the skeptics abstain from all belief, in the sense that they hold nothing to be true. From their point of view, "this is sweet" is as much a belief about the reality of things as "only virtue is good" or "motion exists." Philosophers offer different accounts of virtue, motion, and so on, and the skeptic investigates these accounts, eventually suspending judgment on the question of what is true or false. Simple perceptual matters such as "this is sweet" might look different: they tend not to be the subject-matter of philosophical study. However, discussions about the reality or un-reality of perceptual properties have as long a history in Greek thought as discussions about virtue or motion. The question of whether honey really is sweet ultimately involves taking a stance on what kind of property "sweet" is; and thus the skeptic must also suspend judgment on something as ordinary as whether *this* – what she is eating right now – is sweet.

As a result, suspension of judgment is not confined to 'scientific' matters. The skeptics' refraining from all *dogmata* – all teachings or doctrines – does not refer to suspension of judgment in a limited domain, leaving everyday beliefs in place. Part of my discussion involves taking a stance on the relationship between two notions: *dogma* and *doxa*. For

the skeptic to refrain from *dogmata* is to refrain from *doxai*, beliefs. Beliefs are truth-claims about how things are, and the skeptic does not make such claims.

But the skeptic's mind is not blank. The skeptic thinks about things, the world looks a certain way to her, and so on. How does this work? To explain the skeptic stance, Sextus adopts the conceptual framework of some of the skeptics' fiercest critics, the Stoics. According to this framework, the question about skeptical belief translates into the question of whether the skeptic *assents*. "Assent" is a central term in Stoic philosophy of mind. According to the Stoics, one holds some content to be true by assenting to an impression. When Sextus addresses skeptical belief, he says that the skeptics do not assent to impressions. Impressions can linger in the skeptics' mind; they can orient the skeptics in their surroundings; they provide the skeptics with thoughts; and so on. The skeptics thus have a complex mental life without accepting impressions as true. However, Sextus concedes that *forced* assent and *undogmatic* assent figure in certain domains of the skeptic's life. This concession leads beyond his account of the skeptics' mental states, and toward his account of skeptical action. I explore these matters in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2: The Skeptic's Language

I argue that Sextus develops (or records) a specifically skeptical, non-assertoric language. The skeptic aims to live an ordinary life, which involves talking and communicating with others. Since assertions are taken to express beliefs, the skeptic cannot use assertoric language. At the same time, it may appear impossible to successfully communicate with others if one abstains entirely from assertions. Moreover, the skeptic cannot be envisaged as someone who employs only rudimentary linguistic expressions. His core activity is investigation, which crucially involves sophisticated uses of language.

Accordingly, the skeptic needs a mode of speech that reflects attitudes to appearances that fall short of belief and that nevertheless suffice for ordinary communication as well as for investigation. Sextus calls this skeptical mode of speech reporting, announcing, recording, and laying open. The skeptic reports *what appears to her now*. That is, skeptical utterances are indexed to a particular cognizer at a particular time, and they are meant to be records of what goes on in the skeptic's mind.

Much of Chapter 2 is devoted to an analysis of the skeptical use of the Greek verb '*phainesthai*', 'to appear.' Sextus' use of this verb is seemingly elliptical, but decidedly not to be read in the fashion in which one usually understands elliptical statements. The skeptic, according to Sextus, says "A appears F to me now," rather than "A appears *to be* F to me now." Through this mode of speech, he aims to achieve two things: (i) his speech is comprehensible (it is commonplace to supply the missing element in an elliptical sentence, thus getting the point of the sentence); (ii) his speech is non-assertoric. However, this use of language is katachrestic – it is a *misuse*. I discuss the difficulties that attach to the project of consistently misusing language. Importantly, this project presupposes that the skeptic lives in a community of non-skeptics. Further, I compare the

Pyrrhonian mode of speech to certain verb forms the Cyrenaics employ to capture passive experience through expressions like “I am being whitened”.

Chapter 3: The Pyrrhonian Way of Life

The most famous ancient anti-skeptical argument is that the skeptic cannot act. This argument is based on the assumption that the skeptic disavows belief. Her disavowal can either be sincere, in which case the question arises how the skeptic can act; or it can be insincere, in which case the skeptic’s project fails because she holds beliefs though she says she does not. Chapter 3 is devoted to the skeptic’s response to this so-called Apraxia Challenge.

Sextus argues against Stoic critics by using (or abusing) their premises. According to Sextus, with respect to actions that are most immediately necessary for survival the skeptic is *forced* to assent by the way impressions move her. From the point of view of the Stoics, there is no forced assent: it is the defining feature of assent that it is in our control. That is, at this point Sextus does not invoke a category that dogmatic philosophers have already defined. Nevertheless, the notion of forced assent is an intricate dialectical move. Stoic views about the ways in which impressions are movements of the mind that push us towards or away from assent, assent nevertheless being ‘up to us’, are rather complicated. An ill-meaning critic can exploit seemingly incompatible claims. This is what the skeptics do. They invoke the assumption that assent is up to the cognizer when they report that skeptics don’t form beliefs; and they invoke the assumption that impressions can strongly move us towards assent when they explain Stoic action. For Sextus, forced assent does the job of moving the agent from the passively experienced impression to action. Forced assent is, as the dogmatist would have to admit, in a significant way different from assent. Since it is not in our control, it does not constitute, or so the skeptic argues, the formation of a belief. I defend a related account for undogmatic assent.

Sextus’ description of the skeptics’ life appeals to a fourfold way in which the skeptic adheres to appearances. Chapter 3 offers interpretations of these four domains. The most difficult aspect of the skeptic’s life is the first: Sextus claims that the skeptic is able to perceive and think insofar as he follows appearances. This is a perplexing claim. I offer a novel interpretation, arguing that Sextus exploits the dogmatic view that nature guides us in the acquisition of reason, enabling us to perceive and think. As a natural development, coming to be able to think (via the acquisition of concepts) does not involve judgments. Indeed, one is only be able to make judgments once one has acquired reason, and thereby the abilities to perceive and to think.