

## The Aims of Sceptical Investigation<sup>1</sup>

Investigation, it has been claimed, must aim at the discovery of truths. I shall call this the Discovery Premise: investigation is only genuine investigation if it aims at the discovery of truths. As I shall argue, the Discovery Premise rests on too simple a notion of investigation. Instead, we should adopt the Truth Premise: investigation must be guided by epistemic norms that respond to the value of truth. The Truth Premise makes room for a broader and more compelling conception of investigation.

Adherents of the Discovery Premise raise an objection against Pyrrhonian scepticism.<sup>2</sup> They formulate the Tranquility Charge: sceptical investigation aims at tranquility, rather than at the discovery of truths; therefore it cannot count as genuine investigation. The Pyrrhonian sceptics describe themselves as investigators (PH 1.1-2). If the sceptic's

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper started as a guest presentation on "Socrates and the Sceptics" in Philip Mitsis' graduate seminar on Socrates in the Fall 2007 (NYU). I am indebted to the students and faculty who attended the seminar meeting, as well as to the students in my Spring 2009 Scepticism class and reading group for very helpful discussion. Jens Haas provided valuable feedback on the written version of the paper, as did Diego Machuca and the referees of the press; I am very grateful to all of them.

<sup>2</sup> I am exclusively concerned with the version of Pyrrhonian scepticism that Sextus presents. For some earlier sceptics, Sextus reports, suspension of judgment is, in addition to tranquility, the end of investigation (PH 1.30). However, Sextus does not incorporate this view into his own account of the sceptic's end.

activity is not investigation, she is not a sceptic and her philosophy collapses.<sup>3</sup>

Admittedly, tranquility is, with some qualifications, the end of scepticism (PH 1.25). But the sceptics aim at tranquility *as sceptics*, and that is, as investigators. Their activities thus can not simply be unrelated to truth. They aim at tranquility in matters on which one *could* have beliefs, and on which they would form beliefs, if they did not employ their sceptical methods of investigation.

The Tranquility Charge fails because the Discovery Premise is too limited. First, the idea that investigation aims at the discovery of truths may not adequately capture the many ways of doing philosophy that we and the ancients are familiar with.<sup>4</sup> Some might even find the idea that we as philosophers aim at the discovery of truths naïve. They might not expect to resolve any philosophical questions. But their ways of doing philosophy might still be guided by the value of truth. Second, we should distinguish between the motivational source of philosophical investigation and its aim. Suppose I feel restless if I am not exercising my mind by thinking about complex theoretical questions, or that I find

---

<sup>3</sup> For a forceful version of the Tranquility Charge see G. Striker "Scepticism as a Kind of Philosophy," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 83 (2001): 113-129. See also J. Palmer, "Skeptical Investigation," *Ancient Philosophy* 20 (2000), 351-73, and Casey Perin, "Pyrrhonian Scepticism and the Search for Truth," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 30 (2006), 337-360. The Tranquility Charge is not among the standard ancient anti-sceptical moves. It is a modern complaint against Pyrrhonism. Perin considers PH 2.1-12 an ancient instance of the objection (2006, 338 n.2). But PH 2.1-12 raises a different problem (cf. M 8.337-336a): the sceptic cannot investigate without mastering concepts and thereby, inconsistently, holding some assumptions. Cf. Jacques Brunschwig, "Sextus Empiricus on the *kritêrion*: the sceptic as conceptual legatee," *Papers in Hellenistic Philosophy* (Cambridge 1994), 230-243; my "Skeptische Untersuchung und das Verstehen von Begriffen," *Wissen und Bildung in der antiken Philosophie*, eds. Ch. Rapp and T. Wagner (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006), 325-339; and Filip Grgic, "Sextus Empiricus on the Possibility of Inquiry," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 89 (2008), 436-459. Perin accepts the Discovery Premise and argues that the sceptic aims at two values: truth and tranquility. Palmer argues that sceptical investigation is second-order investigation: the sceptic does not search for the truth, but investigates the theories of the dogmatists. This way of untying the connection between investigation and truth does not seem compelling: what would be the point of investigating dogmatic theories? Even though different theories are critically explored, sceptical investigation must be concerned with thinking about the questions at issue, and thus must have some relationship to the truth.

<sup>4</sup> Striker points out that the philosophizing of an Academic sceptic is much like what many of us do today as philosophers (2001).

philosophy pleasurable, even though I do not see much point in the whole endeavor. The Discovery Premise overlooks the possibility that someone could be motivated to engage in philosophy, but not seriously try to achieve anything by doing so. Third, it is a commonplace that the value of truth is associated with two aims rather than one: the acceptance of truths, and the avoidance of falsehoods. The relationship between these aims can be construed in several ways. Accordingly, there must be several different modes of investigation. Insofar as the avoidance of falsehoods reflects valuation of the truth, investigation that aims at the avoidance of the false should count as genuine investigation.<sup>5</sup>

Pyrrhonian investigation, as I shall argue, needs to be construed with all three considerations in mind. First, it inherits a rather complex conception of investigation, shaped by Socrates and Plato, whose philosophizing does not always immediately aim at the discovery of truths (section 1). Second, it has a motivational source—the unsettling discrepancy between conflicting thoughts—that is distinct from any particular aim one might have (section 2). Third, the value of truth figures importantly in Pyrrhonian investigation, though Pyrrhonian investigation is more immediately concerned with avoidance of the false than with discovery of the true (sections 3 to 5). Investigation must respond to the value of truth. The Truth Premise is crucial for any activity that claims to be a kind of investigation. But contrary to the Discovery Premise, the Truth Premise leaves room for different modes of investigation, among them Pyrrhonian investigation.

---

<sup>5</sup> I shall assume that truth is plausibly considered the epistemically fundamental value, in the sense that it explains other epistemic values. Cf. for example Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge* (New York 2007), 54.

## 1. Socratic Investigation

Sextus draws on a complex conception of philosophy, developed most significantly in the Socratic tradition.<sup>6</sup> He describes phases of Plato's Academy by reference to how Plato and Socrates have been interpreted, thus showing that he is aware of a range of different approaches to philosophy within this tradition (PH 1.220-235). Some, according to Sextus, focus on the dogmatic side of Plato (including Socrates as main speaker), taking him to put forward theories about the Forms, the soul, recollection, and so on. Others focus on *aporia*—dialogues ending without any response to the question at hand. They see that Socrates is sometimes playing with people, and that at other times he is in contest with sophists. These interpreters claim that such dialogues are concerned with a kind of training. Furthermore, Sextus is aware of Socratic schools outside of the Academy, such as the Cyrenaics (PH 1.215), who interpret Socrates' investigations in yet a different fashion.

Arcesilaus, who according to Sextus begins a new phase of the Academy (PH 1.220), is inspired by Socrates' commitment to investigation. Arguably, Arcesilaus does not turn to Socrates by turning away from Plato. Rather, Arcesilaus is likely to have interpreted Plato (not just Socrates) as less dogmatic than other members of the Academy took him to be. Even in middle and later dialogues, which do not focus on *aporia* and refutation, Plato

---

<sup>6</sup> I cannot explore all facets of the conception of philosophy that Sextus engages with. For example, Pyrrhonism seems in various ways inspired by Pre-Socratic philosophizing, where central ideas are often expressed in enigmatic, dense, and almost obscure ways. This mode of formulating one's ideas influences the so-called sceptical formulae, such as “no more,” “I determine nothing,” and so on (PH 1.187-209). However, for the present purposes, the Socratic-Platonic tradition seems most important.

can be seen to investigate in a manner that speaks to the sceptics. For example, one might argue that Plato never fully formulates a version of the Theory of Recollection, or the Theory of the Forms, that he puts forward as his considered view. Rather, he explores different versions of these theories, thinking through their implications, including the difficulties attached to them.

Sextus is acquainted as much as we are with the many sides of Platonic and Socratic investigation. A wide range of activities figures in Plato's dialogues. Socrates can be seen to refute a series of proposals put forward by his interlocutor (for example, in the *Euthyphro*). He interrogates others who claim to have knowledge, arriving at the conclusion that they do not know what they think they know (for example, in the *Apology*). He examines with an interlocutor a range of ideas this person already had or was familiar with, seeing that all of them are problematic (for example, Meno's ideas about virtue in the *Meno*). He and his interlocutor present arguments for and against a given thesis, with no apparent resolution at the end of the conversation (for example, regarding the question of whether virtue is teachable in the *Protagoras*). At times, Socrates and his interlocutor jointly develop some theories, even if none of them is presented as fully compelling (for example, accounts of the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*, where even the final account is considered merely hypothetical). At other times, Socrates appears to emerge unchanged from a conversation, while his interlocutor has genuinely made progress (for example, the examination of Meno's accounts of virtue in the first part of the *Meno*). Socratic investigation here seems to be concerned with the

insights of his interlocutor, not with Socrates' own insights. But nevertheless, philosophical investigation seems to be a joint, dialogical enterprise: both Socrates and his interlocutor investigate together.

These various kinds of Socratic discussions are usually considered to be philosophical investigations. Scholars also agree in ascribing to Socrates a deep concern with the truth. Socratic investigations thus seem to meet the criteria that the Truth Premise sets up. But they may not meet the criteria of the Discovery Premise. It is not obvious how Socratic concern for the truth translates into the aim of discovering truths within a given investigation. For students of Platonic dialogues, it seems possible that philosophers spend years clearing away preconceived opinions and thinking through competing theories. Note that the clearing away of opinions need not and usually does not involve discovery of the truth that they are false. Socrates and his interlocutors often dismiss ideas because their proponent cannot adequately defend them. A better philosopher might be able to argue convincingly in favor of a claim that a beginner, who holds an unexamined belief, is unable to explicate. Accordingly, the fact that a given idea is dismissed does not mean that one discovered that it is false.

When asking whether the Pyrrhonian sceptics engage in genuine investigation, I think we should have this multifaceted picture in mind. We should hesitate to level a charge against the sceptics that we would not level against Socrates—that investigation that does not aim immediately at the discovery of truths can not qualify as investigation. It appears

obvious that Socratic and Platonic investigations meet the Truth Premise: they are inspired and guided by the value of truth. But it is a complicated question how precisely Socrates and Plato respond to the value of truth. Surely, different answers would have to be given for different dialogues, and these answers would involve difficult interpretive concerns. This consideration should warn us against stipulating too straightforward an account of investigation when asking whether the Pyrrhonian is a genuine investigator.

## **2. The Motivational Source: Anomaly**

Pyrrhonian investigation begins with the realization (*to nomizein*) that discovery has not yet taken place (PH 2.11). This realization comes with the experience of anomalies. The sceptic is disturbed by the conflicting impressions she has on a given issue. In PH 1.25-29, Sextus describes this turmoil and tells the story of the sceptic's conversion to scepticism.<sup>7</sup>

Up to now we say the aim of the sceptic is tranquility in matters of belief (*kata doxan*) and moderation of feeling in matters forced upon us. For the sceptic began to do philosophy in order to decide among appearances and to apprehend which are true and which are false, so as to become tranquil; but he came upon equipollent dispute, and being unable to decide this he suspended judgment. And when he suspended judgment, tranquility in matters of belief followed fortuitously. For those who believe that things are good or bad by nature are perpetually troubled. When they lack what they believe to be good, they take themselves to be persecuted by things naturally bad and they pursue what (so they think) is good. And when they have acquired these things, they experience more troubles; for they are elated beyond reason and measure, and in fear of change they do anything so as not to lose what they believe to be good. But those who

---

<sup>7</sup> I am adopting the term 'conversion story' from Gisela Striker (2001). The term must, of course, be taken with some caution. It nicely captures that the sceptic undergoes a life-changing experience when she first becomes a sceptic. However, we need to keep in mind that scepticism is not a state of mind acquired once and for all. The sceptic must continually produce her scepticism through a life of investigation.

make no determination about what is good and bad by nature neither avoid nor pursue anything with intensity; and hence they are tranquil. (...) So, too, the sceptics were hoping to acquire tranquility by deciding the anomalies in what appears and is thought of, and being unable to do this they suspended judgment. But when they suspended judgment, tranquility followed as it were fortuitously, as a shadow follows a body. [PH 1.25-29, tr. Annas & Barnes with changes<sup>8</sup>]

Pre-sceptical investigation aims at settling what is true and what is false. The investigator looks at her views (that is, the things that appear to her, i.e., her impressions), with the aim of settling which of them are true and which are false, which in turn puts her in a state of turmoil. Why is that? Consider two explanations.

(1) Eudaimonism. Sextus says that those who think that something is good or bad by nature are perpetually troubled. If they consider something good, they worry about getting it, or losing it. If they consider something bad, they worry about avoiding it, or getting rid of it. This worry can be called 'eudaimonist'; it has something to do with the role of good and bad things in a well-going life, and with the desire for happiness. More specifically, the worry is characteristic of a certain kind of eudaimonism, the kind that focuses on the instability of human life. Even if I knew that having X is good, I would be tormented by the thought that X can be lost. This is a long-standing Greek preoccupation, already prevalent in Herodotus' *Histories*. Human life is unstable, and the so-called goods of fortune are characterized by the fact that they are not under our control. Children die, health is lost, houses burn to the ground. Whatever I consider good (family, health,

---

<sup>8</sup> I differ from Annas & Barnes (2000) in translating *doxa* and cognates in terms of belief rather than opinion. All translations throughout this paper are, even though they are largely my own, indebted to Annas & Barnes (2000), as well as to Bett (1997) and Bury (1933-49).



wealth), and whatever I consider bad (illness, death, poverty), I shall be in turmoil. In a parallel passage in M 11, Sextus says that all disturbance comes from intensely pursuing and avoiding things, and pursuit and avoidance comes with value judgments (M 11.112-3). Stoic and Epicurean ethics capture versions of this traditional concern. Most importantly, they do so by arguing that that which is truly good cannot be lost (virtue, according to the Stoics), or is available even under adverse conditions (the kind of pleasure that turns out to be good in Epicurean ethics).

While this kind of worry figures widely in Greek thought, it is ultimately not particularly relevant to the Pyrrhonism of the *Outlines*. Sextus may mention the eudaimonist concerns because they are likely to resonate with his interlocutors. The idea that human life is unstable and that all pursuit of goods comes with turmoil is intuitive for many contemporaries of the sceptic. But with respect to a general account of Pyrrhonism, the reference to eudaimonist concerns is misleading. The sceptic investigates all kinds of questions, not only questions of value. Further, it is not clear why, if one is given to the worry that one might lead one's life in a way that brings misery, one should be better off suspending judgment.<sup>9</sup> In leading her life, the Pyrrhonian sceptic adheres to appearances, and that is, to custom, tradition, and the ordinary ways of life (PH 1.21-24). If the worry

---

<sup>9</sup> In M 11.110-167, a major part of one of Sextus' treatises on ethics, it appears as if scepticism were actually confined to ethics. Sextus invokes the dogmatic idea that happiness consists of the having good things. Based on this premise, it is essential to the good life to know what is good and what is bad (110). Now add the premise that all unhappiness is disturbance, and that all disturbance comes from intense pursuit or avoidance of that which is deemed good or bad (112-3). The combination of these premises implies that life is inevitably miserable (at least as long as it is assumed that good and bad things can be lost). Perhaps this state of affairs could lead one to a kind of value-scepticism; only the absence of value judgments can prevent the turmoil of intense pursuit and avoidance. But as Bett argues, this is a distinctively different, and probably earlier strand of Pyrrhonism from the scepticism of the *Outlines*, which is the scepticism that we are most immediately concerned with here. Richard Bett, *Sextus Empiricus. Against the Ethicists* (Oxford 1997), 128-181. Perin too notes that PH 1.25-29 does not fit well into Sextus' scepticism (2006, 342; cf. 352).

regarding value beliefs is that they might be wrong, the same worry should arise for an agent who adheres to appearances. There is no presumption that conventions and customs get things right. One is likely to fare much better with examined views, even if one still does not know that they are true (this is the line of thought in Carneades' version of Academic scepticism). The kind of disturbance we should ascribe to Sextus' sceptic must be different—it cannot be rooted in the idea that, if one's value beliefs are false one is likely to act in ways that bring misery.<sup>10</sup>

(2) Anomaly. In PH 1.29, Sextus says that the sceptic, prior to her conversion, investigates in order to resolve the anomaly (*anômalia*) between different appearances and thoughts. This is the core of the disturbance that sets off sceptical investigation. Inconsistencies (or discrepancies and tensions) between the impressions available to the investigator cause disruption: one is confused because the views one holds or is acquainted with do not fit together. Pyrrhonian turmoil comes from the conflicts between several truth-claims. Anomaly arises in all domains, not only the domain of value. The sceptic can be confused with respect to all kinds of questions, if only several ways of seeing things are available to her. This is an important point. The eudaimonist reading fails in part because it can not account for the generality of Pyrrhonian investigation. The sceptic is not only confused with respect to questions of value, but with respect to any

---

<sup>10</sup> M. McPherran argues that the physiology of belief causes disturbance. He argues that the Stoics view the mind as actively in motion when it assents, and that the sceptics invoke this idea. Furthermore, he suggests that this goal-directed motion creates the disturbing experience of belief. Suspension resolves the disturbance and generates a smooth movement. "Ataraxia and Eudaimonia in Ancient Pyrrhonism: Is the Sceptic Really Happy?", *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 5 (1989), 135-71, esp. 158. McPherran seems right to me in emphasizing the physiology of thought. However, the disruption seems to come with conflict or *anomalía*, not with a particular cognitive activity like assent.

given question that arises for her. This account is also given in PH 1.12, a chapter entitled “The Source of Scepticism.”<sup>11</sup>

Men of talent, who were perturbed (*tarassomenoi*) by the anomalies in things (*en tois pragmasin anômalian*) and in confusion as to which of them they should rather assent to, came to investigate what in things is true and what is false, so that by deciding these issues they would become tranquil. [PH 1.12, tr. Annas & Barnes with changes]

The sceptic’s mind is upset—it is pulled into different directions, because conflicting views or appearances induce her to assent. This is what puzzlement or confusion consists of: it is a state of being epistemically moved. Trains of thought are set in motion, and the subject experiences the tensions among the various views she is attracted to.<sup>12</sup>

Both Stoics and Epicureans, that is, both main interlocutors of the sceptics, conceive of the soul as a physical entity. Thoughts are physical movements in the bodily soul.<sup>13</sup>

Sextus, of course, does not hold any dogmatic theory of the mind. But he exploits this picture insofar as he speaks about the way in which impressions *affect* the mind (this

---

<sup>11</sup> Annas & Barnes (2000) and Perin (2006, 343) translate “*archê*” as ‘causal principle.’ This translation suggests that the driving force behind sceptical investigation is causal, rather than rational. However, our translation should not prejudge this question. The Greek *archê* can mean ‘source’ or ‘origin.’ In Hellenistic epistemology, where dogmatists think of the mind as physiological, any cognitive process can be described in causal terms, and Sextus’ ways of putting things are often parasitic on this framework. However, this does not imply that such movements of the mind could not be described as rational.

<sup>12</sup> Sextus says that the experience that appearances are in conflict is not just the experience of the sceptics, or of philosophers. It is the experience of all of mankind (PH 1.210).

<sup>13</sup> The Stoics define impressions as imprints or alterations of a physical soul; rational impressions (i.e., the impressions of adult human beings) are a sub-class of impressions; they are thought processes (DL 7.49-51 = SVF 2.52, 55, 61 = LS 39A). Impression, impulse and assent are movements of the soul (Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1122A-F = LS 69A); cf. Stobaeus 2.86,17-87,6 (= SVF 3.169, part = LS 53Q). Epicurus conceives of the soul as a fine-structured body, and of thought processes as occurring in this body (*Letter to Herodotus* 63-7 = LS 14A).

being a point that can be reported as an experience, rather than dogmatically stated).

According to the picture that is thus invoked (though not defended), the motions that disturb one's peace of mind are conflicting thoughts.

When thoughts do not fit together, the mind is stirred up. Even though the confusion is rational (it is a confusion among several thoughts), this is a causal event in the bodily mind—the thoughts are physiological alterations of the soul. One way or another, we need to react to this movement. If we are, for example, like some interlocutors in early Platonic dialogues, we run away from the immediate source of confusion (Socrates), divert ourselves with other activities, and let it run its course until it dies out. New impressions or perceptions create fresher movements in the soul, and the alterations that were our earlier impressions wear off. However, if we do not run away from the cause of confusion, we need to do something else with the motion it creates. In this case, we need to respond rationally and try to clear up the confusion by thinking things through. That is, if we want to set the turmoil to rest in a rational fashion, we need to work through the confusing thoughts. The sceptic is committed to rationality in this sense. She needs to sort out the confusion. Anomaly is—causally and rationally—the driving force of scepticism. Anomaly responds to a basic concern with the truth; if truth were not an end or value, then conflicting thoughts might not be disruptive. That is, whatever we go on to say about sceptical investigation, its motivational source reflects the value of truth.

### **3. The Truth-Directedness of Pyrrhonian Investigation**

Anomaly thus is the motivational source of scepticism. Tranquility appears as a plausible correlate of the motivational origin of investigation. If one is moved to investigate because one is in turmoil, then this endeavor will be directed toward the quieting of turmoil. But by itself, this can not yet account for the complex investigative activities of the sceptic.

Pre-conversion, the sceptic wanted to resolve instances of anomaly by settling which of her impressions were true and which were false. But anomaly is not just the initial starting-point of investigation; it is also investigation's ongoing source. That is, being struck by anomaly, the sceptic is again and again caught in the attempt to settle what is true and what is false. She investigates conflicting positions with a view to their truth and falsity. She works her way through the individual theses, arguments, and so on, that together make up theories. If it came to the point that she found a given claim to be true, she would accept it.<sup>14</sup> That is, with a view to the examination of every given impression, and with a view to accepting or rejecting it or suspending judgment on it, the sceptic's activity is *truth-directed*.

Suspension of judgment follows for the sceptic from the equipollence of several positions, and it enables the sceptic not to accept or reject anything (PH 1.8-10). In describing equipollence (*isostheneia*), Sextus speaks about several accounts being equal

---

<sup>14</sup> With a view to particular impressions, the sceptic engages in something like belief-formation, but gets stuck. Suppose that belief is an attitude to a proposition that is truth-directed: to believe a proposition is to accept it with the aim of thereby accepting a truth. (This is a formulation discussed by David Velleman, "On the Aim of Belief," Chapter 11 in *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford 2000), 251.) The sceptic never arrives at the point of actually accepting an impression. However, her attitude in examining theses and arguments is still truth-directed in the sense in which belief is truth-directed.

as far as belief and disbelief are concerned—*kata pistin kai apistian*. Neither of several positions is 'more believable' (*pistoteron*) than the other (PH 1.10). These expressions are difficult to translate, and it might seem that, in order to properly mark the difference between *pistis* and *doxa*, we should not translate in terms of belief. Annas and Barnes render the relevant phrases as “equality with regard to being convincing or unconvincing,” and “more convincing.”<sup>15</sup> This translation, however, suggests that Sextus invokes a category that is at least in part psychological: a position could be convincing in the sense of looking attractive; or it could be convincing because something about it speaks to one. But Sextus refers to a property that impressions are seen to have when assessed in terms of truth and falsity. The sceptic examines competing *logoi* (PH 1.10), arguments or accounts. Doing so, she assesses impressions with respect to their truth or falsity, and that is, with respect to whether she should accept or reject them, or whether she should believe them.<sup>16</sup> But admittedly, 'believability' is an awkward term, and there is a legitimate concern with keeping *pistis* and *doxa* apart. We might rephrase Sextus' point in terms of credibility: several positions fare equally in terms of their credibility, and neither is more credible than the other.

Accordingly, there is an important sense in which Pyrrhonian investigation is truth-directed, thus meeting at least in part the criteria that the Truth Premise sets up. But

---

<sup>15</sup> This translation is an improvement over Bury, who translates in terms of probability.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Horwich writes: “[...] there is no substantial difference between identifying a proposition as false and disbelieving it. So, refusing to believe what we identify as false is just refusing to believe what we *disbelieve*.” (“The Value of Truth,” *Nous* 40:2 (2006), 347-360, 354). I think that something like this is the core of how Sextus relates believability to truth and 'disbelievability' to falsehood.

proponents of the Tranquility Charge might point to what could appear to be an unrealistic feature of Sextus' account of suspension of judgment. Why should several positions on a given question appear *equally* credible to the sceptic?<sup>17</sup> Suppose there is an issue for which there are two different, but seemingly quite plausible positions. While there are arguments on both sides, one side may still strike one as more credible. And since there are some strengths and some weaknesses in each position, one may find oneself drifting toward a new position, which aims to combine the views one has studied. Why should the sceptic end up with a standstill of thought (*stasis dianoias*; PH 1.10), as Sextus calls it, resting between competing positions that are each equally credible, and thus suspending judgment?

Some familiar points can be made in response. The sceptic does not only investigate positions that already exist, as fully-formulated positions. New positions, which combine strong points from several other theories, are also among the theories that are investigated. That is, we should think of standstill of the mind as provisional and temporary. The sceptic suspends with a view to a couple of theories; but then she finds herself drifting towards a new option, and investigation resumes; now she will explore the weaknesses of the newly conceived theory, or several revised theories; and so on. Sextus says that, even if the sceptic cannot come up with a counter argument to a given thesis right now, she is aware that other arguments were once not yet formulated, and later were put forward (PH 1.34). Thus, even if the sceptic should not be able to produce

---

<sup>17</sup> I am grateful for feedback on this point to Nandi Theunissen, who raised some related concerns.

an objection on the spot, she would be inclined to expect that there is an objection.

However, this point may seem to give further weight to the aforementioned objection. Is the sceptic realistically stuck between two equally credible ideas when, say, there are weighty objections on the one side, and merely the expectation of a future objection on the other side?

In order to address this question we must say more about the difference between the sceptic's experience of anomaly and the restful state of suspension. In both states, different appearances on a given issue are on the sceptic's mind. Why is one of these states a resolution of the other? The answer, I suggest, is that anomaly involves a mix of psychological and rational factors, while suspension is an attitude taken with a view solely to *argument*.

Consider an example drawn from a difficult philosophical problem, such as freedom and determinism. Suppose we are intuitively strongly committed to seeing our actions as originating in our deliberations, thinking that it is in some important sense up to us whether we choose one course of action or another. Insofar as we focus on our intuitions, we might never get to the point where several positions seem equally credible. However strong the arguments for determinism, we still conceive of our actions as we used to do. But insofar as we focus on the arguments that can be adduced for both sides (or rather, for multiple competing theories), we might arrive at a different attitude. We might genuinely get to the point where we see the strengths and weaknesses in several accounts, and find



ourselves surveying them in a non-committal state of mind.<sup>18</sup> It is only through the focus on argument that the sceptic can arrive at this balanced state of mind.<sup>19</sup>

Prior to investigation, we are drawn to particular positions because they happen to speak to us; they are persuasive in a psychological, rather than an argumentative way. This kind of imbalance can be remedied by close study of the arguments. The sceptic investigates things ‘*hoson epi tô logo*’ (PH 1.20). That is, in investigation, the sceptic looks at opposite positions *from the point of view of argument*. When she eventually suspends judgment on them, she does so with a view to the arguments she considered. Through the transition from confusion to suspension, the sceptic is no longer subject to the psychological pull of various positions that differ in strength (and which would, if investigation did not prevent this, eventually lead her to assent to the view that looks most attractive).

This proposal involves the interpretation of a much-debated expression: *hoson epi tô logô*. Scholars often take this formula to address the question of whether the sceptic has any beliefs, or beliefs of any kind. Michael Frede argues that, when Sextus says that the

---

<sup>18</sup> Compare this to contemporary discussions about scepticism, which often proceed by setting out so-called sceptical paradoxa. That is, it is assumed that, on the one hand, we are committed to, for example, thinking that there are other minds, and on the other hand, there is a sceptical argument to the effect that there are no other minds. The argument looks valid, and thus we find ourselves in a paradox. We can only sustain this state of mind (of finding ourselves in a paradox) by focusing on the sceptic argument. Once we turn away and back into our ordinary lives and other concerns, it loses its grip on us, and we easily accept the thought that there are other minds.

<sup>19</sup> Hume makes a version of this observation with respect to the arguments concerning scepticism. He thinks that, once we stop focusing on these arguments, they lose their grip on us and we fall back into our ordinary knowledge claims. In some sense, this is lucky, since—according to Hume—all life would otherwise perish. But “[n]ature is always too strong for principle.” (*Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* XII ii).

sceptic does not dispute that honey appears sweet to her, but investigates whether it actually is sweet *hoson epi tô logô* (PH 1.20), this means that Sextus only bans a dogmatic kind of belief from the sceptic's life. He translates the tag as “to the extent that this is a question for reason.”<sup>20</sup> According to his interpretation, Sextus is here distancing the sceptic from beliefs that are based on reason in a certain emphatic, dogmatic sense. However, Sextus uses the expression in order to paraphrase a distinction he just made: in his investigations, the sceptic does not investigate that things appear a certain way; he investigates *what is being said* (*ho legetai*) about appearances. That is, the sceptic investigates statements, theses, accounts, arguments, and so on.<sup>21</sup> Sextus sometimes uses a longer version of the clause: *hoson epi tô logô tôn dogmatikôn*, which Bury translates as “as far as what the dogmatists say is concerned.” This longer expression might appear to confirm Frede's reading, insofar as it might suggest that Sextus distances himself from a dogmatic kind of reasoning. But I think that it works even better with the interpretation I suggest. The sceptic investigates things with respect to the arguments that are put forward about them. These arguments, of course, are often but not always formulated by dogmatists. The sceptic thinks through the arguments that different theorists offer, but she also formulates critical arguments of her own, making sure to arrive at suspension with respect to any particular position.

---

<sup>20</sup> “Des Skeptikers Meinungen” (1979) reprinted as “The Sceptic's Beliefs,” M. Frede and M. Burnyeat, *The Original Sceptics* (Hackett 1998). Bury translates “in its essence” and “as far as what the dogmatists say is concerned.” Perin compares the expression to qualifiers like “as of yet” (*achri nun*) (2006, 349), suggesting that the sceptic 'only' suspends as far as the arguments are concerned. But that seems misleading—it is not as if the sceptic, in some other respect, did not suspend. Suspension is not qualified by relating to arguments. Rather, it is generated by focus on the arguments.

<sup>21</sup> For a similar interpretation of the expression, cf. Brunschwig, “La formule *hoson epi tô logô* chez Sextus Empiricus,” in his *Etudes sur les philosophies Hellenistiques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995). Annas & Barnes translate “as far as the argument goes.”

Sextus' sceptic does not move away from the use of reason. The sceptic is a reasoner, and she must be a reasoner. In her investigations, she thinks through the arguments that can be adduced for various sides of an issue. If she did not do this, she would not be testing these views in terms of their believability, assessing them for truth and falsity. As a reasoner—or, as an investigator who studies arguments—the sceptic arrives at suspension of judgment, in a way that reflects the value of truth. If she arrived at it in any other fashion, her suspension would be willful, rather than rational.

#### **4. Epistemic Preferences and Injunctions**

However, it is a difficult question how the truth-directedness that characterizes the sceptic's attitude to particular impressions relates to the more complex practices of her investigation. Also, it is not clear how the two aims of attaining truths and avoiding falsehoods are reflected in Pyrrhonian investigation. If one wanted only to accept as many truths as possible, one could just accept all impressions. If one wanted only to avoid falsehoods, one could just reject all impressions. But valuation of the truth must consist in a combination of both aims.

Even on the Discovery Premise, investigation does not aim at the acceptance of as many truths as possible. There are too many trivial truths for this to be a sensible goal. More plausibly, we aim to accept all the truths that are worth accepting (for practical purposes of ordinary life, or for purposes of understanding the world, or for making progress in a

given field of study). A further aim of investigation (either taking the place of the aim to attain worthwhile truths, or combined with this aim) might be the best possible proportion of true as compared to false beliefs.<sup>22</sup>

However, if one aims for the best possible proportion of true versus false beliefs, one accepts that one will come to hold some falsehoods. That is, one proceeds on the assumption that, if one wants any beliefs at all, one cannot avoid that some of them shall be false. But this assumption might appear problematic. Why should one accept that one's practices of belief-formation will provide one with some false beliefs, mixed in with a greater number of true beliefs? Perhaps this is a plausible picture of belief-formation, at least in some domains of everyday life. But it is not obvious that, as investigators, we should be content with investigative practices that lead one to a favorable ratio of true versus false beliefs. One might devise strategies that reflect different epistemic values: values according to which, for any given question, it is preferable to acquire no view at all as compared to acquiring a view that could turn out to be false.

Sextus' scepticism builds on this intuition. Of course, unlike Stoic or Epicurean epistemologists, the Pyrrhonian sceptic cannot argue for a particular set of epistemic values. However, scepticism develops in conversation with Stoic and Epicurean philosophy. In these exchanges, the sceptics dialectically engage with a range of ideas about the value of truth. Consider for example the famous debates between Academic

---

<sup>22</sup> These options are taken (roughly) from Velleman (2000, 251).

sceptics and early Stoics.<sup>23</sup> The Stoics put forward an ambitious criterion of truth, the cognitive impression. A cognitive impression arises from what is, and is stamped and impressed exactly in accordance with what is, thus being clear and distinct.<sup>24</sup> The Stoics formulate the epistemic norm that one should only assent if one has a cognitive impression.<sup>25</sup> Otherwise one should suspend. That is, the Stoics think that, to adequately respond to the value of truth is to withhold judgment in every case where an impression could turn out to be false. The Stoic attitude is radical: for any given impression, suspension is better than assent that comes with only the slightest risk of accepting a false impression. Every such assent, however slim the risk would be, is considered rash. From the point of view of the Academics, this means that the Stoics should end up as sceptics: they should always suspend their judgments.

Consider further the Epicurean claim that all sense perceptions are true, and the sceptic engagement with this view. This thesis is notoriously difficult to interpret. Roughly, it means that all sense perceptions are physiological events; as such, they are facts.<sup>26</sup> For example, a tower looks round from a distance and square from nearby. In the first case,

---

<sup>23</sup> The main arguments in this debate can be found in the following texts. Phase 1 (Arcesilaus): 7.46, 54; Cicero *Acad.* 1.40-1 and 2.77-8; SE M 7.247-52; SE M 7.402-10. Phase 2 (Carneades): DL 1.177; Cicero, *Acad.* 2.57 and 2.83-5; SE M 7.253. Many of the relevant passages are collected in Chapter 40 in Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Cf. my “Ancient Skepticism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2010), ed. Edward N. Zalta ed., URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism-ancient/>>

<sup>24</sup> DL 7.46 (= SVF 2.53, part = LS 40C); Cicero, *Academica* 1.40-1 (= SVF 1.55, 61, 60, part = LS 40B).

<sup>25</sup> Cicero, *Academica* 2.77-8 (= LS 40D).

<sup>26</sup> One line of argument says: all sense perceptions are true because nothing can refute them (the senses cannot refute each other, no particular sense perception can refute another sense perception, reason cannot refute the senses because reason has its starting-point in the senses) (Lucretius 4.469-521 = LS 16A and DL 10.31-2 = LS 16B). Another line of argument is the one I am focusing on above—it ultimately seems more promising to me: every sense perception is true insofar as sense perception does not yet involve judgment; perceptions are facts, just like pain, and in this sense true (DL 10.31-2).

the atomic image (emitted by the object and traveling toward the perceiver) is affected by its travel through the air; accordingly, the edges are eroded. But this does not mean that the former impression is false and the latter true. To expect otherwise is as if one thought that, when hearing a bell ring, one would hear its actual or true tone only from inside of the bell. Perceptions differ, but they are not in conflict: the differences between them can be accounted for by physics (SE M 7.206-9). Accordingly, there is no falsity on the level of perception. Falsity comes with judgment: “[...] we judge some things correctly, but some incorrectly, either by adding and appending something to our impressions or by subtracting something from them, and in general falsifying arational sensation” (SE M 7.210).<sup>27</sup> Note that perception here is characterized as arational, which means that it does not involve any active cognitive stance. Sense perceptions are not yet beliefs.

Epicurean epistemology focuses on the methods by which we should arrive at our judgments, and on the evidence we have for and against them. True beliefs are those that are attested (and that means, attested by what is evident), and those that are uncontested by self-evidence. False beliefs are those that are contested and those that are unattested by self-evidence (SE M7.211-216). In order to arrive at true beliefs, we must on the one hand aim to adhere to the evidence of the senses, rather than doing what we are prone to

---

<sup>27</sup> When Epicureans explain the details of this conception, it is clear that they talk to sceptics, and with sceptical examples in mind (things taste differently to different people, the tower that looks round from a distance and square from nearby, and so on). Schofield suggests that there is an exchange of arguments between Epicurean epistemology and Aenesidemus' scepticism (“Aenesidemus: Pyrrhonist and 'Heracleitean',” A.M. Ioppolo and D. Sedley, *Pyrrhonist, Patricians, Platonizers. Hellenistic Philosophy in the Period 155-86 BC. Tenth Symposium Hellenisticum* (Bibliopolis 2007), 269-338). While I cannot argue for this view here, I think that Pyrrhonian engagement with Epicurean epistemology is much underrated, and runs through several strands of Pyrrhonism. Sceptical arguments often target a philosophy that does not declare cognitive impressions to be criteria of truth, but more radically, sense perception—that is, they address themselves towards philosophers with Epicurean views.

do: add to or subtract from perceptions while we make our judgments. On the other hand, we must keep an open mind when the evidence is not conclusive. At times, we must list several possible explanations, rather than settle for one.<sup>28</sup> The Epicureans thus put forward a thought that greatly interests the sceptics: that falsity is introduced by judgment, and that prior to judgment, we have available to ourselves some mental content—the perception—to which our own cognitive activities have not yet added anything.

Based on these and other debates with dogmatic philosophers, the sceptics develop what I shall call their own epistemic preferences and injunctions. A Pyrrhonian sceptic cannot argue for any epistemic values and norms. But at the same time, it is clear that no one would turn into a sceptic if she did not deeply care about avoiding falsehoods. Indeed, it seems that the immediate interlocutors of the sceptics are all committed to epistemic norms geared toward the avoidance of falsehoods. As one interlocutor among them, the sceptic seems to be part of this project. If the sceptic did not greatly prefer not to accept any falsehoods, she would cease to be a sceptic.<sup>29</sup>

Sextus picks up, as an injunction that captures the sceptic commitment to avoiding falsehoods, one of the Stoics' central epistemic norms; he continuously warns against

---

<sup>28</sup> Epicurus, *Letter to Pythocles* 85-8 (= LS 18C) and Lucretius 6.703-11 (= LS 18E).

<sup>29</sup> Horwich mentions (but does not endorse) a rationale for considering the value of avoiding falsehoods prior to the value of pursuing truth that seems rather similar to the sceptic preference: “[...] once someone has decided to investigate a certain question—whatever it may be—then his not getting the answer right would surely be subject to criticism. But are we really obligated to investigate *all* questions—to believe every single truth?” (2006, 348). Also, an unqualified ‘pursue truth’ norm might be less plausible than an unqualified ‘avoid falsity’ norm.

precipitate assent.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Sextus can cite Epicurean epistemic norms, without endorsing them, or offering his own arguments for them. Sextus employs the Epicurean distinction between the evident and the non-evident.<sup>31</sup> He says repeatedly that the sceptic investigates the non-evident, and does not call into question the evident. What is evident, in Sextus, are the sceptic's affections.<sup>32</sup> The sceptic can invoke the Epicurean thesis that everything that is added to or subtracted from the experienced is a potentially falsifying alteration. The sceptic leaves intact that which she passively suffers—she does not subtract anything (does not deny it), but also does not add anything (does not affirm it or formulate it in any way that goes beyond a report of the experience; PH 1.4, 19-20, 22). Similarly, the Epicurean instruction not to settle for any theory if several theories are equally well (or badly) attested by the evidence fits the sceptic's argumentative techniques (PH 1.181). Citing other sceptics (not dogmatic philosophers) Sextus also invokes the injunction to oppose an equally weighty argument to every argument.<sup>33</sup> Sextus says that the sceptic might be in danger of giving up sceptic inquiry, and might need to be reminded that she should oppose each argument with an argument—otherwise, she will fall back into dogmatism (PH 1.205).

---

<sup>30</sup> The idea that one should avoid rashness comes up in a number of contexts, for example PH 1.205, 236-7, 3.235.

<sup>31</sup> This distinction is of course employed by different philosophers and schools. It would take up too much space and lead too far away from the my topic to explore whether Sextus invokes, as I think he does, the Epicurean distinction. However, not much in my present argument hangs on this point.

<sup>32</sup> When the sceptic 'is coldened' or 'sweetened,' he shall not say that he is not (PH 1.13). Such passive experiences are, in Sextus, the realm of the evident.

<sup>33</sup> "To every argument an equal (equally weighty) argument is opposed" is one of the sceptic's formulae. Sextus does not trace this to any dogmatic theories. However, if asked whether this kind of norm is a piece of dogmatism, he certainly could. It has a long ancestry in Socratic and sophistic disputations, as well as in Peripatetic practices of training in argument.



## 5. The Modes

But over and above the less formalized strategies, Pyrrhonian investigation employs so-called modes of argument. These are forms of argument which the sceptic can apply to different questions, thus leading herself or her interlocutor into suspension of judgment. The Ten Modes (Modes of Aenesidemus) provide her with a number of ways of setting appearances and thoughts into opposition (PH 1.36-163). For example, she can keep herself from assenting to “the honey is sweet” by reminding herself of the different physiology of different animals, which is likely to affect taste-experience; she can recall how it tasted differently when she was sick; and so on. The Five Modes help the sceptic investigate any thesis or theory put forward on a given issue (PH 1.164-177). She can ask whether some premises are not accounted for; whether the argument is circular; and so on. Or consider the modes employed against causal explanations (PH 1.180-186). For example, if a medical theory said that such-and-such symptoms are caused by such-and-such hidden processes in the body, the sceptic can point out that the theory explains matters in its own conceptual framework; that it neglects alternative explanations; that it postulates non-evident substances and events; etc. With these and similar techniques, the sceptic can produce suspension of judgment on any given matter (or at least, this is the aim). The Tranquility Charge—that the sceptic is not an investigator, because she aims at tranquility rather than at the discovery of truths—may appear particularly forceful when we consider the modes. The sceptic's argumentative practice might seem mechanical and exclusively geared towards suspension.

However, by now we have prepared the ground for the sceptic's response to this charge. For anyone with the epistemic preferences of the sceptic—as well as her dogmatic interlocutors—the modes may be just what she needs. Yes, it is true that the sceptic has an arsenal of argumentative techniques, designed to produce suspension of judgment. But that is rationally called for, and from the point of view of the sceptics, the dogmatists might implicitly be committed to adopting such techniques too. Impressions have the power to move us toward assent, and we need to constantly work against this if we want to make sure that we only assent when we should. Given that one is likely to have weak moments, where one is not sufficiently on one's guard, it is best to devise routine strategies—methods that can be applied when needed in a mechanical fashion.

The Tranquility Charge finds fault with something that is utterly needed: a reliable technique of critically examining any given impression. The Tranquility Charge says that, to apply this technique is to lack genuine commitment to the truth. But this is a misguided objection. For the sceptic's modes seek to draw attention to every problem that might lurk in a given theory. If one prefers not to assent to impressions that could turn out to be false, such modes are quite appropriate. The sceptic would happily recommend her methods to her dogmatic interlocutors, and it is not clear that her contemporaries would find this advice as unattractive as we would. The Tranquility Charge was not raised by the sceptic's contemporaries. Many of them share the sceptic's intuition that all must be done in order to avoid falsehood, even if this means that one will not form any beliefs at all.

## 6. Conclusion

The Hellenistic intuition that the false is seductive—that the mind assents easily when it should not, or adds and subtracts falsifying assumptions to the evident if we do not guard ourselves against this—resonates with the sceptics. One needs to work actively against these tendencies. Dogmatism is not a specific kind of theorizing, engaged in by some particularly confident thinkers, while others find it easy to keep an open mind.

Dogmatizing is like swimming with the current. It is, in Sextus' characterization, the default mode of the mind: if the sceptic became lazy and forgot to investigate, she would turn into a dogmatist (PH 1.205). If one does not make a systematic effort, the movements of one's mind will lead one to accept falsehoods. So far, the Hellenistic interlocutors agree. The sceptic's techniques of steering away from assent go further than those of her dogmatic contemporaries. But they are inspired by the same intuitions.

Pyrrhonian investigation meets the criteria set up by the Truth Premise. Its motivational source—anomaly—arises due to the role that truth plays in thought. The sceptic's attitude toward particular appearances is truth-directed. Her epistemic preferences respond to the value of truth, and her epistemic injunctions are geared toward avoiding falsehoods. The modes of argument are an even more elaborate technique, designed with this aim in mind. Though Pyrrhonian investigators do not expect to discover that anything is true or false, they engage in a kind of investigation that reflects the value of truth.

## Bibliography

- Annas, J. and Barnes, J. 2000 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Bett, R., 1997 Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists (Adversus Mathematicos XI)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press). With commentary.
- Brunschwig J. 1994 "Sextus Empiricus on the *kritêrion*: the sceptic as conceptual legatee," *Papers in Hellenistic Philosophy* (Cambridge: CUP), 230-243.
- 1995 "La formule *hoson epi tô logô* chez Sextus Empiricus," in his *Etudes sur les philosophies Hellenistiques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France).
- Bury, R.G. 1933-49 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press – Loeb Classical Library), 4 vol.s.
- Frede, M. 1997 "The Sceptic's Beliefs," in Burnyeat, M., Frede, M. (eds.), 1997 *The Original Sceptics* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett).
- Grgic, F. 2008 "Sextus Empiricus on the Possibility of Inquiry," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 89, 436-459.
- Long, A. A., and Sedley, D.N. 1987 *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2 vol.s. Texts organized by schools and themes: translations and philosophical commentary in vol.1, Greek and Latin texts and philological commentary in vol.2.
- Horwich, P. 2006 "The Value of Truth," *Nous* 40:2, 347-360.
- Hume, D. 1999 *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: OUP).
- McPherran, M. 1989 "Ataraxia and Eudaimonia in Ancient Pyrrhonism: Is the Sceptic Really Happy?," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 5, 135-71.
- Palmer, J. 2000 "Skeptical Investigation," *Ancient Philosophy* 20, 351-73.
- Perin, C. 2006 "Pyrrhonian Scepticism and the Search for Truth," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 30, 337-360.
- Schofield, M. 2007 "Aenesidemus: Pyrrhonist and 'Heraclitean'," A.M. Ioppolo and D. Sedley, *Pyrrhonist, Patricians, Platonizers. Hellenistic Philosophy in the Period 155-86*

*BC. Tenth Symposium Hellenisticum* (Napoli: Bibliopolis), 269-338.

Sosa, E. 2007 *A Virtue Epistemology: Apt Belief and Reflective Knowledge* (New York, OUP).

Striker, G. 2001 "Scepticism as a Kind of Philosophy," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 83, 113-129.

Velleman, D. 2000 *The Possibility of Practical Reason* (Oxford, OUP).

Vogt, K. M. 2006 "Skeptische Untersuchung und das Verstehen von Begriffen," *Proceedings of Wissen und Bildung in der antiken Philosophie*, eds. Ch. Rapp and T. Wagner (Stuttgart: Metzler), 325-339.

– 2010 "Ancient Skepticism," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism-ancient/>>