

## Pyrrho and the Sceptics

*Pyrrho of Elis (roughly 360-270 BCE): his philosophy is directly influenced by an encounter with Indian sages and Persian magi, in the period of Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire. The school he later founded in his home town of Elis, was known (among other names) as 'sceptical', because of its focus on a search for truth, and its rigour in critiquing the certainties of philosophical schools that made bold claims to truth. The point of evolved Scepticism according to the medical doctor, Sextus Empiricus (writing 500 years later) is to consider the different ways that we can be misled by our senses and our assumptions, to balance competing arguments against each other, and to recognise that there comes a point where the urge to enquiry becomes fruitless. Accordingly, we abandon pointless argument and we get on with normal life in peace.*

*There are a number of things that we have already come across that feed into the sceptical tradition. We have Parmenides and Plato distrusting the evidence of the senses, we have Epicurus distrusting arguments that conflict with sense data, we have Plato questioning the foundations of knowledge. And of course, we have the Sophists interested in ways of arguing that will wrongfoot an opponent. By the time of Cicero, Plato's Academy had become focused on a form of scepticism that denied the possibility of knowledge, instead, it was necessary to suspend judgment and live in uncertainty. This is a bit different from Pyrrho's scepticism, if we are to believe Sextus Empiricus, his third century advocate. For Pyrrho, according to Sextus, the point was not to end up not believing anything, but to be able to get on with life at peace (that word 'ataraxia' again) unbothered by the quarrels of dogmatic philosophers. Perhaps this too shows something of a Buddhist trait. This is what Sextus has to say to people who accuse sceptics of denying the evidence of the senses:*

THOSE who say that sceptics eliminate things as they appear seem not to have heard anything of what we say. We do not overthrow those things which involuntarily via the passive faculty of imaging lead us to affirm them...these are things as they appear to us. But when we are enquiring if the underlying source of the appearance is as it appears, we are accepting the appearance, but we are raising questions not about the appearance but about what is claimed about the appearance. For instance honey appears to produce a sensation of sweetness; we affirm this. For our experience of sweetness is sensory. Whether the statement that it is sweet is true, this we put to the test, because that is no longer the appearance, but a claim made about the appearance. And if we do actually argue against things as they appear, we do not set out these arguments out of a desire to eliminate appearances, but to demonstrate that the dogmatic philosophers have been too hasty. If argument is so deceptive that it can all but rob our eyes of the appearances, how should we not be cautious with argument over things unobservable, so as not to be too hasty to follow it? [Outlines of Pyrrhonism, I X (Loeb)]

## The principles of scepticism

We say the original cause of scepticism is the hope of a life without distress. People of noble nature are disturbed by the inconsistencies in affairs, and because they are uncertain about which things to affirm, they started to enquire about what is true and false in affairs,

so as to achieve peace of mind by reaching a verdict on these things. The main principle of the sceptic system is for every argument to balance an equal and opposing argument; through this we believe that we can leave off being dogmatic. [Outlines of Pyrrhonism I, VI]

### **Scepticism**

Scepticism is a capacity for arraying objects of appearance and objects of the mind in opposition in any way whatever, and by it because of the balance of forces in the things and the arguments, we come first to suspension of judgment and then to peace of mind. When we say 'capacity' we don't mean any technical term, we simply mean being able to do something. [Outlines of Pyrrhonism I, IV]

We still assert that the goal of the sceptic is peace of mind in their beliefs and a moderation of suffering where this is unavoidable. They begin to do philosophy, so as to bring a verdict on appearances and to establish which are true and which are false, so as to find peace of mind, they stumble upon a contradiction that is equally weighted on both sides, and as they withhold their judgment, coincidentally there follows a peace in their opinions. For anyone who believes something is good or bad in its nature will continually be upset; for when those things that seem good to him are not present, he believes he is being punished with things that are naturally bad, and chases after what he believes to be good. And once he has acquired them, he falls into still deeper turmoil because he is irrationally and immoderately elated, and in fear that this will change, he does whatever he can so as not to lose those things that seem good to him. But to anyone who avoids defining what is naturally good or bad, strains themselves neither in flight nor in pursuit; thus they have peace of mind. [Outlines of Pyrrhonism I, 12]

### **The General Approaches of Scepticism**

As we were saying that peace of mind follows on from a suspension of judgment about everything, it makes sense now to speak of how we arrive at that suspension. To speak in general terms, it arises through putting things in opposition. We set phenomena against other phenomena, or conceptual objects against other conceptual objects, or a mixture. An example of phenomenon against phenomenon is when we say "the same tower looks round from a distance, but square close up"; Conceptual object against conceptual object, when we set in opposition to someone trying to show that there is providence from the order of the heavens the fact that good people often suffer hardship while the bad are successful, and from that we infer that there is *no* providence; conceptual object against phenomenon, like Anaxagoras, who set against the fact that snow is white that snow is solidified water, but water is black and therefore snow is black.

With a slightly different approach, we sometimes oppose things that are present to other things that are present, as in the previous cases, but sometimes we set present claims against past and future claims. For instance, when someone presents us with reasoning that we cannot resolve we tell him "just as the reasoning belonging to the school you belong to did not seem sound before the one who introduced the school came along, yet in it was already there in reality, so too it is possible that the opposite reasoning is already there in

reality, but has not yet been revealed to us, so we are not yet bound to give our assent to what at present seems a strong argument. [Outlines of Pyrrhonism, I, 13]

### The hard stuff (examples)

#### *Five modes of scepticism*

The later sceptics pass on the following five modes [leading to] suspending judgment. The first is the mode of 'disagreement', the second is 'infinite regress', the third is 'relativity', the fourth is 'hypothetical axiom', and the fifth is 'circularity'.

The 'disagreement' mode applies where we find a conflict has arisen among lay folk and philosophers about a particular topic such that we cannot choose or reject any one opinion, so we escape this by suspending judgment.

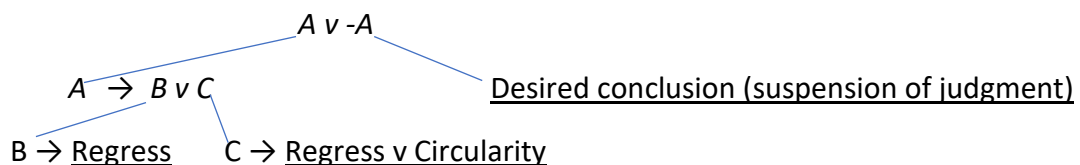
The 'infinite regress' mode applies when we say that what is being brought to bear as evidence of the matter in hand itself requires further evidence, and that [piece of evidence] requires another, and so on *ad infinitum*. Thus, as we have no basis on which to begin our demonstration, it follows that we suspend judgment.

The 'relativity' mode is where relative to the person making the judgment and what they are observing an object appears to be *so* or *so* but we suspend judgment about how it is in its actual nature.

The 'hypothetical axiom' mode applies when dogmatic philosophers are caught in an infinite regress and so begin from a starting point which they do not establish, but simply posit as an axiom by agreement without demonstration.

The 'circularity' mode applies when the thing that is supposed to confirm the object of investigation requires evidence that is dependent on that same object of investigation. Since neither can be used to establish the other, we suspend judgment about both.

*An example of the modes in action: notice the argument trees:*



We will briefly show how every subject of enquiry can be referred to these modes. The topic may be about something that can be perceived with the senses or grasped with the mind, but whichever it may be, there is a fundamental disagreement. Namely, that some people say that only things that can be perceived with the senses are true, some people say that only the things that are grasped with the mind are true, and some say that some of the things that can be sensed are true and some of the things that can be grasped with the mind are true.

So will they claim that this dispute can be resolved by a further judgment or not? If it cannot be resolved then we conclude that we have to suspend judgment, because where no further judgment is possible in a dispute, we cannot make a positive assertion.

However if [they say] there can be a further judgment, we need to find out how that judgment will be made. Let's first take the position of [those who claim] the perceptible [is the basis for truth]. Do we resolve this by referring to what can be perceived, or to what can be grasped with the mind? If we resolve it by referring to something that can be perceived, because we are making an enquiry about just those things that can be perceived, then that will need something else by way of evidence; and if that other thing is an object of the senses then that too will need something further to provide evidence and so on *ad infinitum*.

But if we are to use what can be grasped with the mind to make a judgment about what is perceptible, since there is also a dispute about such objects of understanding, this same thing, as an object that can be grasped with the mind will need some justification and evidence. But where will the evidence come from? If it is to come from what can be grasped with the mind, then this ends likewise in an infinite regress. If it is to come from what can be grasped with the senses, given that the intellectual is being brought in to provide evidence for the sensory, and the sensory to provide evidence for the intellectual, then the mode of circularity comes into play...

*He goes on to show how the 'hypothetical axiom' mode and the 'relativity' mode come into play on the same topic as well. (Outlines of Pyrrhonism, I (15) 164-172)*

*Causation (this is an argument that it is not possible to formulate a concept of a cause)*

So this is what some say: the cause must either come into existence at the same time as the effect or it must precede it in coming into existence, or it must come into being after it. Now to claim that the cause is brought into existence after its effect has come into being is surely ridiculous?

But it cannot precede it in existence either. For they say that cause is conceived in relation to its effect, but as they themselves argue, things that are in relation to one another, insofar as they exist in relation, co-exist and are co-conceived with each other.

But nor can they come into existence together. For if the cause is supposed to bring about the effect, and what comes into being must do so from something that already exists, then the cause must first come into being as a cause, and then thus bring about the effect.

So if the cause neither pre-exists its effect nor comes into existence with it, and the effect certainly does not come about beforehand, then there is no way it has any existence at all. Clearly, by this argument too any conception of 'cause' is overturned.

For if the cause – as a relational entity – cannot be conceived prior to its effect, but in order for it to be conceived as the cause of its effect it has to be conceived prior to that effect, yet it is impossible for something to be conceived prior to a thing, it is impossible for it to be conceived prior to [!], it is impossible to conceive of a cause...

*And of course, since there are equally good reasons for believing in the existence of causes, the only sensible thing to do is suspend judgment on whether causes exist or not. (Outlines of Pyrrhonism, III (5) 26-28)*

## Sceptics and God

Since not everything that is conceived participates in existence, but it is possible to be conceived without existing – as in the case of the Hippocentaur and Scylla – now that we have explored the concept of gods we will have to enquire about their existence. Of course the sceptic will turn out to be on safer ground than those of other schools. He will simply say that in accord with the customs of his native land and its laws, there are gods and he will do whatever is appropriate by way of ritual and reverence. However with regard to the philosophical enquiry, he will make no rash commitments. (Against the Physicists I, 49)

## An account of standard proofs of the existence of gods

Those who believe that gods exist attempt to prove their proposition in four ways. One is the universal agreement of human beings. The second is the order of the cosmos. The third is the absurd consequences for those who deny the gods. The fourth and last is by the refutation of arguments to the contrary. (Against the Physicists I 60-61)

### *A select argument for the existence of gods*

In addition to these arguments [from the structure of the universe] philosophers from the Stoa and their adherents try to establish the existence of gods from the motion of the cosmos. That the cosmos is in motion everyone could agree, led to that by a variety of evidence. So it is either moved by nature, or by a free choice or by a vortex and by necessity. But it is not logical to say by a vortex and necessity. For the vortex will either be disorderly or orderly. And if it is disorderly, it would be unable to move things in an orderly fashion. But if it moves anything in good order and harmoniously, it will be divine and godlike. For it would not induce a motion that is orderly and for the good of the whole unless it were there as something intelligent and divine. But if it were that kind of thing, it would no longer be a vortex. Because a vortex is chaotic and temporary. In consequence, the cosmos would not be in motion by the necessary force of the vortex, as the followers of Democritus claimed. Nor could it be by a nature without the capacity for consciousness, insofar as intelligent nature is better than [unconscious nature]. Because we see [intelligent] natures present within the universe; so the universe itself must have such an intelligent nature, for it to move in an orderly fashion, and this is precisely god... (Against the Physicists I, 111-114)

### *A select argument against the existence of gods*

If god exists, he is an animal. If he is an animal then he has sense perception, for an animal is only distinguished from the non-animal by perception. But if he perceives, he also hears and sees and smells and touches. If this is so, then there are some things that he finds congenial, and others he finds uncongenial to each sense, so for example with sight, things that are well-proportioned, rather than otherwise, with hearing, melodious sounds rather than those that are not, and so on with the other senses. If this is so, then there are some things which are unpleasant for god, and if there are things that are unpleasant for god. And if god can find some things unpleasant, then god is subject to a change for the worse,

and so is perishable. Therefore god is perishable. But that was contrary to the common opinion about him. Therefore the divine does not exist. (Against Physicists I 142-143)

**But what about the sceptical ‘proof against proof’: how is that possible?**

*Sextus concludes his attack on the logicians with an argument proving the impossibility of proof. This is how he rebuts the charge of an illegitimate process:*

There are many things which have the same effect on themselves as on other things. For instance, fire consumes fuel and then destroys itself, and it is like purgatives which drive fluids out of bodies, and expel themselves at the same time. Thus too the argument against the possibility of proof, after eliminating all demonstration can cancel itself as well. Again, just as it is not impossible for someone who has climbed up to a high place on a ladder to kick away the ladder with their foot once they have got up, so too it doesn’t seem implausible for the sceptic to use the argument that there is no proof like a step-ladder and once they have reached the intended proof, then to eliminate this very argument. [Against the Logicians II, 480-481]

*And you might want to set that alongside the conclusion of one of the most sophisticated texts in logic and epistemology of the twentieth century:*

The correct philosophical method would really be only to say what could be said – that is scientific propositions. In other words, something that had nothing to do with philosophy. And then when anyone tried to say something metaphysical, we would show him that there were certain signs in his propositions to which he had given no meaning. The other person would not find this procedure satisfying - he wouldn’t feel that we were teaching him philosophy – but this would strictly speaking be the only correct one.

My propositions provide insight insofar as anyone who understands me will in the end grasp that they are without meaning, once he has climbed up by them, up them, beyond them. He will have to as it were throw away the ladder once he has climbed up it. He has to work through these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.

Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent.

*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 6.53, 6.54, 7.