

PHIL 321
Lecture 27: The Modes of Skepticism

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Modes

Generally speaking, “modes” were codifications of the skeptical ability to oppose any argument with an argument of equal strength

There were several sets of modes, the most famous of which were the “Ten modes” (attributed by Sextus to “the older skeptics”) and the “Five modes” (attributed by Sextus to “the later skeptics”)

The Five Modes

[1] The mode based on “disagreement”

[P1] Epicurus says that void exists

[P1*] Chrysippus says that void does not exist

[P2] Epicurus is always correct

[P2*] Chrysippus is always correct

[C] Void exists

[C*] Void does not exist

Other frequent example: appealing to religious/spiritual/lay authority (both textual and personal)

[2] The mode based on “relativity”—this actually is a reference to the Ten Modes (so the ten modes are “contained in” the five modes) (*HP* 325-337)

[1] Variation among animals

[2] Differences among humans

[3] Different conditions of the sense organs

[4] Circumstances

[5] Positions, distances, and places

[6] Mixtures

[7] Quantities and structures of external objects

[8] Relativity (Sextus notes that this, in a sense, contains the other nine modes)

[9] Constant or rare occurrences

[10] Practices, laws, beliefs in myths, and dogmatic suppositions

Example: [1] Variation among animals—olive oil is beneficial to humans but harmful to bees

[P1] Olive oil benefits humans

[P1*] Olive oil harms bees

[P2] What benefits humans is beneficial

[P2*] What harms bees is harmful

[C] Olive oil is beneficial

[C*] Olive oil is harmful

[3] The mode based on “infinite regress”

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[P _n]	[P _n *]
<u>[P_{n+1}]</u>	<u>[P_{n+1}*]</u>
[C]	[C*]

[4] The mode based on “hypothesis”

[P1] Human beings are mortal	[P1*] Human beings are immortal
<u>[P2] Socrates is a human being</u>	<u>[P2*] Socrates is a human being</u>
[C] Socrates is mortal	[C*] Socrates is immortal

This might strike you as bizarre, since the likely response is to say “But P1* is *false* and P1 is *true*.” The skeptic will say, “Ahh, that is a different issue. You have just stated P1 as a hypothesis here, so it has no more force than P1*, also stated as a hypothesis. If you would like to discuss the relative merits of P1 vs. P1*, by all means, let’s do that.” Thus, it’s easy to see how these discussions, when carried far enough, will go back to issues concerning criteria of truth.

But, think about more plausible “hypotheses,” such as “something is only bad for X if X can somehow be aware of X or X’s consequences”

[5] The mode based on “circular reasoning”

[P1] Socrates is mortal	[P1*] Socrates is immortal
<u>[P2] Socrates is a human being</u>	<u>[P2*] Socrates is a human being</u>
[C] Socrates is mortal	[C*] Socrates is immortal

Think about how these three modes “work together”—unless someone is going to present an infinite argument, the argument has to stop somewhere. It can either stop at a premise that is different from the conclusion or the same as the conclusion. The worry is that, either way, the skeptic can pounce.

Is there any hope?