

PHIL 321
Lecture 26: Pyrrhonian Skepticism
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Kinds of philosophers

Dogmatists: Think they have found the truth

Academics: Think the truth cannot be found

Skeptics: Are still inquiring into the truth

Two major questions:

- [1] Can someone have the philosophical experience described by Sextus and still be a “good faith” inquirer into the truth?
- [2] Can a person be a skeptic, in Sextus’ sense, and still have beliefs about the world? If yes, what kinds of beliefs can they have?

What is skepticism?

For most other “philosophies” you can list their central tenets, and being an *X*-philosopher consists in accepting those central tenets (or, at least, a substantial number of them)

Skepticism, on the other hand, is defined as an ability, specifically “the ability to set in opposition appearances and ideas in any manner whatsoever, the result of which is first that, because of the equal force of the opposed objects and arguments, final suspension of judgment is achieved, and then freedom from disturbance” (*PH* 1.8)

“Appearances” = perceptual impressions

“Ideas” = mental impressions

“Opposed arguments” = arguments with inconsistent conclusions

“Equal force” = equality with respect to plausibility and lack of plausibility

“Suspension of judgment” (*epochê*) = standstill of the intellect according to which we neither affirm nor deny anything

“Freedom from disturbance” (*ataraxia*, “tranquility”) = serenity or calmness of the soul

The path to skepticism (*PH* 1.12)

Being disturbed by the inconsistency in things → inquire into which is true to get rid of disturbance → equipollence in arguments → *epochê* → *ataraxia*

Skeptical Dogma

Sextus says in *PH* 1.12 that, due to coming across equipollent arguments, the skeptic ceases to dogmatize

Then, in 1.13, he immediately qualifies this, and says that there are two senses of “*dogma*” and that the skeptic has *dogma* in one sense but not in another:

“Broader sense” = approving of something (allowed)

“Narrower sense” = assent to something non-evident investigated by the sciences (not allowed)

What makes the difference between these two type of dogma?

Content: whether a proposition *P* is a non-evident matter depends upon the terms in *P*

Mode of acquisition: whether *P* is non-evident depends upon the way in which belief in *P* is acquired

The skeptic suspends judgment whether *criteria of truth exist*, and many philosophers have thought that that renders them incapable of having any beliefs whatsoever

The “skeptical criterion”

Sextus says that there are four ways in which the skeptic is led to act *without* violating skepticism

- [1] Guidance given by nature: skeptics perceive and think
- [2] Compulsion exercised by states: hunger leads to food, thirst to drink
- [3] Traditional laws and customs: accept pious living as good, improper living as bad
- [4] Teaching of crafts: Sextus was a doctor!

Is it possible to understand someone being able to do all this *without* beliefs? If not, can the kind of *dogma* allowed a skeptic accommodate it?

Why Pyrrhonian Skepticism is best

Sextus says that skepticism is better than the alternative “philosophies” because it allows one to achieve the tranquility that they all seek

Everyone is striving to determine the truth, thinking that the truth shall make them tranquil, but the skeptic found that suspending judgment, and no longer believing that tranquility depends upon reaching the truth, brought that tranquility (like a shadow follows a body; sponge of Apelles)

In fact, skeptics are supposed to be better off than people who were never troubled by the inconsistency in things in the first place. While the skeptic, like those people, will experience hunger, pain and the like, they won't be troubled by the *additional* thought that those things are, in reality, bad