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Scepticism and Modern Philosophy

In Sextus Empiricus' method of sceptical inquiry described in his "Outlines of Pyrrhonism" he gives us an account of how withholding from judgment can achieve "quietude" or in other words peace of mind. He does so by questioning certain topics about how the human mind gains information about the world; such as the senses and our state of mind. Through examples present in the text he proves that we can never really know anything at all about the world, mostly because our senses are quite misleading to us. For example, Sextus outlines that we can never really know if we are awake or asleep; such as being unable to determine the difference between a dream and reality. Similarly, in René Descartes "Method of Doubt" from his *Meditations on the First Philosophy* he attempts to prove his reality; that which he believes to be true about the world. In doing so, he states that anything which is indubitable, or certain, shall be accounted as truth, and anything else shall be believed as being false. In doing so he adopts a sceptic's point of view, stating that anything which is known through the senses must be false as his senses have deceived him many times before. Also, he provides an account of waking from a dream that seemed to him to be reality. While Descartes is a rationalist, he does not refute the view of Pyrrhonian scepticism, rather he adopts a sceptical point of view in hopes to prove his own reality in his "Method of Doubt". The method which he uses can be compared in many ways to Sextus Empiricus' essential method of sceptical inquiry described in his "Outlines of

Pyrrhonism”. Using the basis provided by Sextus, Descartes goes beyond this essential scepticism and reaches a conclusion about what really exists, and what does not.

The first of the similarities between Sextus and Descartes, is their views on the human senses. Sextus holds an account of the senses in his third mode as follows: “This Mode also will bring us round to suspension of judgment, as we are unable to make any absolute statement concerning the real nature of external objects” (87). Sextus is stating that we cannot make any judgments based on the real nature of external objects. The way in which we gather information about external objects is through the senses, thereby stating that it is unreasonable to trust the senses. Sextus also provides similar examples as to how one should not trust the senses; namely, he discusses how honey is pleasant to the tongue but irritating to the eyes (83). Descartes also presents an account of the distrust of human senses: “I have learned either from the senses or through the senses; but it is sometimes proved to me that these senses are deceptive, and it is wiser not to trust entirely to any thing by which we have once been deceived” (115). In his first Meditation, Descartes adopts a Pyrrhonian sceptic’s point of view. He does this by asserting that he cannot take anything as truth by which he has arrived at from his senses. Claiming that the sense impressions have deceived him before and he shall not trust anything which has deceived him. He provides some examples, such as wax moving from a circle to a square to a triangle (Descartes, 119). This is parallel with Sextus’ method by the third mode, proving that both believe anything which is known through the senses must be false. As shown, both Sextus and Descartes, mention and account for the difference between wakefulness and sleep.

From the point of view of Descartes it is shown that “What happens in sleep does not appear so clear nor so distinct as does all this” (115). In exact correlation with Descartes, Sextus’

view on the state of “The waking person, for instance, cannot compare the impressions of sleepers with those of men awake” (84). In this instance, both Descartes and Sextus agree that there is nothing to be said, or made true, about being awake or asleep. Rather, it is impossible to tell if one is truly awake or just asleep, dreaming of another reality. Descartes gives an example: “How often has it happened to me that in the night I dreamt that I found myself in this particular place, that I was dressed and seated near the fire, whilst in reality I was lying undressed in bed!” (115). Sextus also states that the human mind is unable to truly distinguish the feelings between wakefulness and sleep. Sextus suspends judgment to the belief in state of wakefulness, while Descartes considers anything he attains through the senses to be false.

As shown, Descartes does not refute the sceptic’s point of view, rather, in many ways adapts the philosophy of the Pyrrhonian sceptics. Through examples, Sextus and Descartes prove that humans can never really know anything at all about the world, because our senses are misleading, and we can never really know anything about being awake or asleep. The similarities above warrant further inquiry into the relationship between Descartes and Sextus beyond the obvious resemblance.

Although Descartes does in fact take up a sceptical approach he fails to look at the criterion which the Pyrrhonians hold very dear. On the other hand, Sextus argues: “This is enough to say now, in our outline sketch, with reference to the criterion ‘According to which,’ as it was said, objects are judged” (91). In this case, Sextus takes on a more argumentative style attempting to argue with oneself in a monologue by asking probing questions such as “what is the criterion as to which humans know [the belief]?”, or, “how can humans realize what is truth and what is false reality?” for example.

As opposed to what the sceptics use to fend off the dogmatists, Descartes uses a deceiver in proving all the things which he sees are false by stating: “There is some deceiver or other, very powerful and very cunning, whoever employs his ingenuity in deceiving me” (118). In this case, Descartes assumes all his beliefs to be false, as the deceiver deceives him. He radicalizes the method sceptical inquiry outlined above by introducing this concept of an arch deceiver. Rather than asking himself what the criterion for which his beliefs are false, he imagines a scenario where the deceiver has put forth everything which he believes to be truth which is in fact not truth but a deception invoked by this deceiver.

The methods which both Sextus and Descartes invoke are to attain a final goal. The sceptics believe that “The originating cause of scepticism is, we say, the hope of attaining quietude” (Sextus, 81). Quietude is a sense of peace of mind, which the sceptics believe is achieved through suspension judgement. With this quote: “tranquility follows on suspension of judgment” (Sextus, 82), it is evident that the sceptics believe that tranquility is another way to achieve quietude. Sextus does this by withholding, or suspending, judgments about the external world. This is contrary to what Descartes does. Instead, Descartes is attempting to rationalize whether or not things are for certain or indubitable; for example, placing judgments on arguments to attain something to be said about the world. As present in this quote, Descartes is attempting to find out if things actually exist or not: “I shall ever follow in this road until I have met with something which is certain, or at least, if I can do nothing else, until I have learned for certain that there is nothing in the world that is certain” (117). This is shown by him following the method of doubting all things until he finds something which is certain or indubitable. Descartes continues to radicalize the Pyrrhonian sceptics point of view. In this statement he is

assuring that he will, rather than that he will simply try, to find something which is certain or indubitable. In this radicalization of a sceptic's point of view Descartes sets out to find something which is in fact indubitable.

Descartes will make use of this deceiver to find something which is certain. He begins by saying everything which he sees, and any state which he is in is because the deceiver has placed him in the position to see and feel what he does. He then reaches something which he finds to be certain: "Let who will deceive me, He can never cause me to be nothing while I think that I am, or someday cause it to be true to say that I have never been, it being true now to say that I am, or that two and three make more or less than five, or any such thing in which I see a manifest contradiction" (Descartes, 121). Descartes finishes his thought experiment by saying that a deceiver can not deceive him to think that he exists. This is the basis of his argument of his own existence, if he can think then it must be the case that he exists. By doubting all things, he suspects a deceiver and by doing all the doubting which he does he comes to the conclusion that he does exist.

After discovering his own existence, Descartes moves on to build up the foundation of his knowledge. He still employs a sceptic's point of view by doubting knowledge which comes from humans. He says, "I do not think that the human mind is capable of knowing anything with more evidence and certitude. And it seems to me that I now have before me a road which will lead us from the contemplation of the true God (in whom all the treasures of science and wisdom are contained) to the knowledge of the other objects of the universe" (Descartes, 125). This is the end of the radicalization that Descartes takes on scepticism. He is stating that humans themselves can never really know anything other than their own existence. He goes on to explain that

everything which is in the universe, and seen by the universe, is because God has willed it. He is taking the earlier conception of the arch deceiver and employing a God who is all powerful and essentially the opposite of the deceiver.

In taking up a similar approach to Sextus Empiricus' Pyrrhonian scepticism, Descartes is able to radicalize the view to prove his own existence by way of the deceiver - an entity which places false belief in him. After doing so he gives an account of a God, whom is the opposition of the deceiver, this God places a sense of judgment in him rather than the deception that the deceiver placed. Such judgment is the impressions of the world. Based on this account of Descartes' "Method of Doubt" it seems that, in theory, the Pyrrhonian sceptics would agree with his approach. In the midst of the deceiver's deception, Descartes is able to understand that he must exist and that the world is the way it is because God has allowed him to see it. Contrary to this, the Pyrrhonian sceptics, in practice, would refute Descartes as there is no certain criterion for that of the deceiver, or for any God. Rather the criterion which Descartes gives is based on his own account.

In conclusion, while René Descartes is seen to the modern philosopher as a rationalist, he adopts a view similar to that of the Pyrrhonian sceptics described by Sextus Empiricus. During his existential method of doubt, Descartes radicalizes this sceptical point of view coming to a conclusion which proves his own existence, and all of which he knows to be true about the world. This proof makes ample use of an all powerful deceiver to come to the conclusion that while he's doubting he exists. When it comes to proving his beliefs he makes use of an all powerful God, through this Descartes does not explain the criterion to which he knows that there

is an all powerful God, rather just accepts that there exists an opposing force to the deceiver.

This is why in theory the sceptics would agree with him, but in practise they would not.

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