

# The Pyrrhonian Stigma

Joel M. Buenting

## Introduction

Post-Aristotelian philosophy until Augustine (roughly from the early fourth century BC to the late fourth century AD) is perhaps the most neglected area in Western philosophy. Not surprisingly, the average undergraduate student will have received no formal training in the tradition's late ancient period. By way of private reading the student may have been introduced to Stoicism and Epicureanism but their Hellenistic counterpart, Scepticism, receives comparably little or no attention. In fact, in many histories of philosophy ancient Scepticism isn't mentioned at all or, if it is mentioned, it is only referred to in passing.<sup>[1]</sup> Rather, it seems that if one is familiar with Descartes and Hume one has learned all one relatively needs to know about philosophical scepticism. Nothing could be further from the truth: An element that makes the study of scepticism an important component in any philosophical education is that scepticism simply presents itself, in one form or another, throughout the entire history of Western philosophy. Philosophers who were either sceptics themselves or deeply interested in scepticism form a formidable group indeed.<sup>[2]</sup> The tenacity of scepticism suggests that, although not (usually) presented as a doctrine with formal components, scepticism has long been considered as something important; something, to be sure, that needs to be addressed.

## The Stigma

Presumably, the lack of attention given to ancient scepticism reflects its perceived (and often exaggerated) conceptual difficulties - what I call the *Pyrrhonian Stigma*. The Pyrrhonian Stigma is the unduly critical and superficial attitude typically directed towards the philosophical movement taken from the name of its founder, Pyrrho of Elis (c. 365-275 BC). On this view, Pyrrhonian scepticism is inconsistent and self-refuting, contradictory and too radical to be considered serious philosophy. The question that naturally presents itself at this point is this: Is the Pyrrhonian Stigma an accurate reflection of Pyrrhonian scepticism? Has scepticism, in other words, been fairly and accurately represented by the tradition?

My thesis is that it has not. Ancient Greek Scepticism has been interpreted in such a way as to render it trivial, its arguments unconvincing, and its legacy hardly worth mentioning. This essay will defend ancient Scepticism against its stigmatized and simply inaccurate portrayal.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Pyrrhonism in Outline

Pyrrhonism did not develop in isolation, but was influenced by the chronological development of the philosophy that preceded it. The development of Pyrrhonism was directed by a host of pre-Hellenistic sources, including Platonism (particularly the Socratic method); the Sophists Protagoras and Gorgias,<sup>[4]</sup> and pre-Socratic philosophers, including Democritus, Parmenides, and Heraclitus.<sup>[5]</sup> Generally speaking, in terms of characterizing the relationship between scepticism and earlier Greek philosophy two major points are usually emphasized. The first is derived from the life and conduct of Pyrrho and speaks to a moral (and hence a practical) dimension of scepticism;<sup>[6]</sup> the second traces the development of scepticism through Greek theory of knowledge.<sup>[7]</sup> Both the moral aspect of Pyrrhonism and the solution it offered to problems developing from previous Greek epistemology contributed to scepticism as being considered a plausible alternative to Epicureanism and Stoicism in the Roman world.<sup>[8]</sup>

Greek epistemology before scepticism had concerns with the possibility of knowledge, to be sure, but Pyrrhonism was the first philosophy to put doubt into practice as a practical philosophy.<sup>[9]</sup> Long before the epistemology of the sceptic became a focal point of scholarly attention, Pyrrhonism developed primarily as a moral philosophy.<sup>[10]</sup> By rejecting what was perhaps seen as the overoptimism of Platonism and Aristotelianism, Pyrrhonean scepticism was meant to sever the link between knowledge, happiness, and virtue.<sup>[11]</sup> For the sceptic, philosophy does not lead to happiness. Philosophy is not, as characterized by Plato in the allegory of the cave, a liberator: A philosophy that splendidly takes man beyond mere appearance and, with an enduring grandeur few philosophies have been able to match, reveals to him what is immutable and everlasting. Similarly, Aristotle's 'virtue of thought' (the study and contemplation of philosophy), does not lead to wisdom or, which he thought was the same thing, to the of pinnacle of human excellence. In terms of moral philosophy, then, Pyrrhonean scepticism may be seen as the historical antithesis to the use of reason to achieve *eudemonia* and, more generally, to secure any knowledge at all. Doubtless happiness can be achieved; but for the sceptic, the means to achieve it are other than philosophical. It is only when the misguided pursuit of truth is abandoned, when philosophy herself is abandoned, that we can possibly achieve *ataraxia*, or peace of mind - the sceptical equivalent to human happiness.<sup>[12]</sup> In a tradition popularly characterized as a series of footnotes to Plato,<sup>[13]</sup> nothing could be more unpopular - or carelessly studied and trivialized - than a countermovement to rationalism that developed within the shadows of the great philosophies of antiquity.

In terms of the history of Greek scepticism, the Greek philosopher Sextus (fl. 200 AD) was "probably not an original thinker."<sup>[14]</sup> Instead, he is regarded more of as a copyist, deriving his arguments from previous (and now lost) sceptical texts.<sup>[15]</sup> Regardless, of the extant literature his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is the most complete and comprehensive systematization of the corpus of ancient sceptical arguments available today.<sup>[16]</sup> No other sceptical text now exists with the historical breadth (around five centuries) as is contained in the *Outlines*. Sextus describes the goal of scepticism, unlike the goal of

earlier Greek philosophy, not in terms of knowledge or wisdom, but in terms of quietude. For Sextus,

[T]he sceptic's end is quietude in respect of matters of opinion and moderate feelings in respect of things unavoidable. For the sceptic, having set out to philosophize...so as to attain quietude thereby, found himself involved in contradictions of equal weight, and being unable to decide between them suspended judgment; as he was thus in suspense there followed, as it happened, the state of quietude in respect of matters of opinion.<sup>[17]</sup>

How does the sceptic achieve a state of quietude? Quietude is found in two senses. First, while thought to be achieved through the spoils of philosophical inquiry, peace of mind or quietude was hit upon quite accidentally. Quietude is discovered through an inability to decide between equally convincing or equally tenable alternatives. For the sceptic, quietude is found, in some sense at least, as a result of philosophical *failure*. Attempting to philosophize - in the actual process of what it means to be 'doing' philosophy - the sceptic finds himself confronted with 'conflicting accounts' and 'contradictions of equal weight.' Unable to resolve them - unable to resolve, say, the conflict between the propositions 'the soul is immortal' and 'the soul is not immortal' - the sceptic performs, for what is perhaps the first time in Western philosophy, the *epoche* or suspension of judgment. What the suspension of judgment means for the sceptic is that (i) after considering any proposition *p*, the sceptic (ii) neither affirms ('believes in') the truth of *p* nor (iii) denies ('does not believe in') the truth of *p*.<sup>[18]</sup> That is to say, because of the *equipollence* of reasons (the equally balanced arguments supporting the veracity of *p* and its negation), the sceptic 'gives up' and the resulting state, though initially unintended, is peace of mind. In essence, this is all being a Pyrrhonian sceptic means: *x* is a sceptic if and only if *x* has considered *p* and neither affirms nor denies the truth of *p*. The "standstill of the intellect"<sup>[19]</sup> (intellectual undecidability) allows the sceptic to retain a completely neutral position on any issue and to live, as was his goal, a life of unperturbed quietude.

The second sense in which the sceptic finds quietude is through arguments used to induce the *epoche*. Having discovered that the suspension of judgment leads to tranquility, the sceptic's effort becomes one of argument. For any proposed thesis, the strategy of the sceptic is to counter, arguing for an equally balanced antithesis. Ideally, through antithesis (or 'opposition'), neither the sceptic nor his interlocutor will reach a solution to the propositions being argued; instead, they will reach a state of intellectual undecidability, neither affirming nor denying the veracity of the arguments at hand.<sup>[20]</sup> Sextus describes peace of mind following the suspension of judgment - in technical terms *ataraxia* following the *epoche* - as a "shadow follows a body."<sup>[21]</sup> Notice that since the Pyrrhonist neither affirms nor denies any proposition, scepticism is not equivalent to a simple negation of knowledge.<sup>[22]</sup> With this sketch in mind we will be in a better position to appreciate the arguments brought to bear upon Pyrrhonian scepticism and the responses the sceptics offered. Not only will the sceptics rise to the challenge and refute the allegations brought against them, but they will launch their own counter attack,

concluding that scepticism is not only persuasive, but inevitable.

## Scepticism is Incompatible with Living

As the Western tradition developed, the sceptic's lack of assent, coupled with, in effect, their claim that we can know nothing for sure, became a central point of scholarly criticism resulting in the widespread rejection of Pyrrhonism as a serious philosophy.<sup>[23]</sup> Typically, commentators 'read' into scepticism elements which, upon closer examination, are not actually present or, if they are present, become distorted and amplified - creating an inaccurate and unfavorable representation of Pyrrhonian 'doctrine.' Even in recent literature the Pyrrhonist is interpreted as outright denying the possibility of knowledge and, even more radically, denying the possibility of belief.<sup>[24]</sup> Commenting on the plain vulnerability of the sceptical position, Russell writes, "Scepticism is not merely doubt, but what may be called dogmatic doubt."<sup>[25]</sup> For the same reason Bergmann rejects scepticism as "one of the silliest philosophies."<sup>[26]</sup> This is the Pyrrhonian Stigma: Pyrrhonian scepticism is too radical to be a serious philosophy; it is self-refuting and impossible to live with; contradictory and unrealistic to adopt as a practical philosophy. According to this line of thought, the Pyrrhonist is a negative dogmatist (*viz.*, someone who dogmatically claims that knowledge is impossible). Inaccuracy characterized as 'extreme' or 'unmitigated,' the perceived abandonment of knowledge and the emphasis placed on Pyrrhonism as a purely negative philosophy became a popular (if not completely unfounded) interpretation.

The sceptic's agnosticism with regard to intellectual assent has given rise to the powerful charge that the sceptic cannot live with his (unmitigated) scepticism. Pyrrhonism, in other words, is incompatible with the activity of actually living. It is quite apparent that in order to act purposefully and meaningfully in the world not only do we need to have desires, but beliefs about how those desires may be satisfied.<sup>[27]</sup> A tacit assumption in the desire for food is the belief that it will satiate me, the desire for sleep implies the belief that it will rest me, and so on. With no beliefs at all, therefore, it would seem that any action whatsoever would be simply impossible. We would resemble Buridan's donkey who, although hungry and standing between two bales of hay, nevertheless starves to death because he has no reason to choose the bale to his right over the bale to his left.<sup>[28]</sup> Just as impossible, it seems, would be the activity of a practicing sceptic. Therefore, as a practical philosophy scepticism is incompatible with living. The Greek physician Galen even wonders, "whether the Pyrrhonists expect us to stay in bed when the sun is up for lack of certainty about whether it is day or night, or sit on board a ship when everyone else is embarking, wondering if what appears to be land is really land."<sup>[29]</sup> Poignantly summarizing the apparently damning criticism that Pyrrhonism is incompatible with living, Milton and Shipka write that the "sceptic's living usually puts a lie to his talking" and "If you examine his behaviour you will find that he acts on statements of belief he accepts as truthful implicitly."<sup>[30]</sup>

Of all philosophers, Hume himself was guilty of classifying Pyrrhonism as an unmitigated scepticism

leading, as charged, to inaction. The Pyrrhonist must acknowledge, Hume thinks, “if he will acknowledge any thing, that all human life must perish, were his principles to universally and steadily prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men would remain in total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence.”<sup>[31]</sup> Of course Hume could never accept scepticism in an unmitigated form and, recognizing it in his ancient predecessors, rejected Pyrrhonism as unrealistic. For Hume, the inclinations of ordinary life (‘animal faith’) supercede scepticism as a practical philosophy. Although we can provide no justification for beliefs based on the senses or for reason in general, we still have to operate in the world as if they were reliable and accurate guides.<sup>[32]</sup> Hence, on the ‘collapse’ of Pyrrhonism Hume writes

The great subverter of *Pyrrhonism* or the excessive principles of scepticism, is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life. These principles may flourish and triumph in the schools; where it is, indeed, difficult, if not impossible, to refute them. But as soon as they leave the shade, and by the presence of real objects, which actuate our passions and sentiments, are put in opposition to the more powerful principles of our nature, they vanish like smoke, and leave the most determined sceptic in the same position as other mortals.<sup>[33]</sup>

The ancient sceptics, however, were much closer to the position Hume actually adopted than Hume realized sharing a similar (positive) conclusion with regards to their inquiry. Like Hume, they too recognized that regardless of the impossibility of justifying beliefs based on the senses, nature dictates that we have to act in the world as if they were true.<sup>[34]</sup> For the sceptic to accept a belief that was rationally unjustified is not a contradiction; for it seems to do otherwise is psychologically impossible.<sup>[35]</sup> In fact, Sextus readily admits that the sceptic may assent to what he referred to as ‘evident’ beliefs, like feelings forced on us by appearances, but withholds assent on anything remotely unclear or non-evident - speculation on the nature of things, for example, or of science.<sup>[36]</sup> Obviously sensitive to the charge that scepticism is incompatible with living, Sextus writes, “attending to what is apparent, we live in accordance with everyday observances...for we are not to be utterly inactive.”<sup>[37]</sup>

The argument that the Pyrrhonist will be effectively paralyzed to the operations of everyday living is remarkable given the length at which Sextus actually discusses the various activities of the sceptic. Attending to what is apparent, Sextus thinks, the sceptic acts in accordance with a fourfold classification of ‘everyday observances.’ First, the sceptic accepts ‘nature’s guidance’ whereby we think and perceive. Second, the sceptic accepts the ‘necessitation of feelings’ which compel us to food and drink. Third, through the ‘hading down of customs and laws’ the sceptic acts in observance with the standards of his culture. “We accept,” Sextus writes, “from an everyday point of view, that piety is good and impiety bad.”<sup>[38]</sup> Finally, the sceptic accepts the ‘teaching of expertise,’ presumably in reference to learning a trade or a craft. “And we say all of this without holding any opinions.”<sup>[39]</sup> In terms of ancient scepticism, then, ‘appearances’ have to be understood as encompassing much more than the meaning it

gets from a more narrow conception, say, in phenomenologist epistemology.<sup>[40]</sup> Since the sceptic does in fact assent to appearances and holds (evident) beliefs, his behaviour is *ipso facto* indistinguishable from the non-sceptic. In retrospect, Hume's criticism appears quite incredible given his apparent, though seemingly superficial, familiarity with Sextus' work. Disappointingly, Hume is not the only major figure in Western philosophy to misunderstand ancient scepticism and contribute to its stigma. Such is the legacy, it seems, of Pyrrhonism.<sup>[41]</sup>

### Scepticism is Self-Defeating

Commentators are typically quick to point to what is apparently the self-defeating epistemology of the sceptic. The most obvious and certainly the most immediate objection to Pyrrhonism is the sceptic's acceptance of at least *some* philosophical knowledge. The sceptic's apparent willingness to withhold assent on all matters seems patently inconsistent with maintaining that we can know nothing for sure. On this view, the Pyrrhonist is an unreasonable and self-refuting philosopher failing to recognize an obvious feature of his philosophy. If the Pyrrhonist claims that assent, either positive or negative, ought to be withheld and that, moreover, knowledge is unattainable, then the sceptic can be pressed to justify his assent to the proposition 'knowledge is unattainable' and his commitment to the proposition that 'knowledge is unattainable' is true. Hence the sceptic knows and has assented to at least one thing and is therefore guilty of refuting himself.<sup>[42]</sup>

The sceptics would have been quite familiar with the objection that scepticism is self-refuting. The objection, after all, is one they faced in their own time.<sup>[43]</sup> To avoid the charge that scepticism is self-refuting the sceptic utilizes a clever and rather original rebuttal. There is absolutely no reason why the sceptic cannot, if only for didactic purposes, claim to possess knowledge of scepticism and argue positively for its acceptance.<sup>[44]</sup> For the purpose of instruction, the sceptic may readily assent to possessing knowledge only to withdraw it later in order to maintain a sceptical composure. In other words, for the sake of consistency, the sceptic may withdraw his assent thereby no longer committing himself to the 'acceptance' of knowledge.<sup>[45]</sup> In this sense scepticism is analogous to ingesting a medical purge which, after ridding the body of its ailment, also rids itself.<sup>[46]</sup> Characterized in this way, the sceptic is not dogmatically committed to a thing.

Sextus himself responds to the charge that scepticism is self-refuting. In *Against the Mathematicians* Sextus objects, "Just as it is not impossible for the man who has ascended to a high place by a ladder to overturn the ladder with his foot after his assent, so also it is not unlikely that the Sceptic after he has arrived as the demonstration of his thesis by means of the argument...should then abolish this very argument."<sup>[47]</sup> Suffice to say the sceptics were not negative dogmatists. They did not claim that nothing could be known and they did not claim it dogmatically. "Philosophers who think otherwise," Groarke sarcastically points out, "reject a position that is not actually adopted by the sceptics or, it appears, by

anyone else in the history of philosophy.”<sup>[48]</sup> That being said, the charge that scepticism is self-defeating takes on a more venerable guise.

If the sceptic does not assent to non-evident beliefs, as Sextus reports, how can he present a detailed account of the non-evident character of scepticism? To be sure, Sextus offers us a detailed description of scepticism; yet claims to be a sceptic.<sup>[49]</sup> Since the sceptic withholds assent on non-evident beliefs (philosophical or otherwise) it follows that the sceptic does not believe in scepticism himself. If the sceptic doesn't believe in scepticism, why should we believe in the sceptic?

Although the objection seems promising, it's really a non-starter. Sextus may not believe in scepticism, to be sure, but it doesn't follow that he (or any other sceptic) cannot inform us that they are sceptics, or provide us with a detailed account of the aspirations of scepticism generally.<sup>[50]</sup> In a remarkable turn, *just because Sextus doesn't believe what he says it is no reason for us not to believe what he says.*<sup>[51]</sup> Barnes notes that “This is not even paradoxical. Anyone acquainted with a parrot or tape recorder has come across this phenomena. For parrots and tape recorders have no beliefs, and yet words tumble from their beaks and loudspeakers.”<sup>[52]</sup> In fact, you may have very good reasons for accepting what the parrot says, though you know the parrot doesn't believe it.<sup>[53]</sup> The point is that if the parrot and the tape recorder can convey reliable information, there is no reason that the sceptic cannot do the same.<sup>[54]</sup>

The objection that the sceptic does assent to non-evident philosophical beliefs is a non-starter as well. Remarking on sceptical utterances, Sextus writes, for example, that when the sceptic says “‘I determine nothing,’ what they say is this: ‘I now feel in such a way as neither to posit dogmatically nor reject any of the things that fall under this investigation.’”<sup>[55]</sup> Similarly, when the sceptic claims ‘everything is undetermined’ “he takes ‘is’ in the sense of ‘appears to me.’”<sup>[56]</sup> With the proviso ‘it seems like’ or ‘it appears to be the case,’ and so on, Sextus seems to think the sceptic can thus reduce apparently dogmatic and non-evident assertions to ‘evident’ appearances. The sceptic can, therefore, provide us with a systematic and detailed account of philosophical scepticism without contradicting himself.

## The Art of Scepticism

Having to some extent settled the objection that the Pyrrhonian philosopher is a self-refuting negative dogmatist whose philosophy is manifestly contradictory and necessarily conflicts with living, we can move on, with some confidence, and see just what exactly *real* Pyrrhonian scepticism is. Sextus defines scepticism as “an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and account, we come first to suspension of judgment, and afterwards to tranquility.”<sup>[57]</sup> Since we are already familiar with these articles of scepticism (equipollence, the epoche, and ataraxia), it will be worthwhile to focus in greater detail on the actual style of argumentation the sceptic utilizes - what Sextus referred to as an *ability* -

rather than on Pyrrhonism's more formal components. Characterizing scepticism as an ability can be explained in either one of two ways. First, Sextus was keenly aware that scepticism, defined as a doctrine, would require to be defended by non-evident philosophical beliefs. Hence by avoiding a definition of scepticism in terms of a doctrine, Sextus yet again avoids the charge of self-refutation. Given the remarks in the preceding section (*viz.* Sextus doesn't need to believe in scepticism), this is perhaps the wrong interpretation. The second, more consistent interpretation is that scepticism is an ability that allows its practitioner to oppose assertions of knowledge. If so, just what do we mean to say when we call scepticism an ability? What kind of ability is it?

The ability of the sceptic is to derive, for any thesis, an equally balanced antithesis. If the resulting conflict is truly equipollent, truly balanced, then the dispute admits of no solution and the suspension of judgment follows. As an example, consider a trivial thesis: 'Snow is white.' In response the sceptic would argue (and Sextus does argue, using Anaxagoras) that snow is frozen water, water is black, therefore, snow is black.<sup>[58]</sup> Self-evidence on the one hand is countered by a demonstrative proof on the other. When the sceptic argues that 'snow is black,' he himself is not convinced of the truth of his thesis. Rather, given the authority of a proof juxtaposed against the authority of self-evidence, the sceptic (and hopefully his interlocutor), will suspend judgment neither affirming nor denying the 'real' colour of snow.

Consider a more complex thesis: 'All men are mortal.' Instead of offering his assent, the sceptic would counter, presenting an alternative thesis, 'all men are immortal' or perhaps 'some men are immortal.' The sceptic may argue thus: 'All men would have to die before we could say they're *all* mortal. In that case, there would have to be at least one person alive to validate the mortality of all men - and that's impossible. Moreover, universal conclusions cannot be inferred from particular instances (the death of loved ones). The immortality of man is thus a logical possibility.' Notice exactly what the sceptic is up to: He is deriving reasons for possibly doubting the 'mortality' thesis. Hence, given the equipollence of reasons for the thesis and the antithesis, we must suspend our judgment in regards to both conclusions about mortality of man. Whether man is mortal is thus intellectually undecidable.

Where an additional argument is provided to 'tip the scale' in support of the original 'mortality' thesis - 'man is a biological organism and all biological organisms have a limited life span' - the sceptic would oppose yet again trying to balance out the argument completely. The sceptic may again retort 'all biological organisms would first have to perish before we could claim they *all* have a limited life span.' Or perhaps the sceptic would press his opponent into admitting that we tend to think of 'man' as more than just a 'biological organism' and, further, what it means to be a human being is somehow lost in the reduction from 'man' to 'biological organism.' What first appears to be progress in the argument is not progress at all: Every proposition put forward in favor of the thesis is put in 'check,' as it were, countered at every step by an equipollence of reasons. Never, in any event, will the sceptics leave

unchallenged what they consider to be the “rash” and “self-serving” assertions of a dogmatist or non-sceptical philosopher.

One question remains to be answered: Does the suspension of judgment actually follow from equipollence? Suspension of judgment follows from equipollence in the sense that first, it is simply unreasonable to prefer, for no good reason, one position over another.<sup>[59]</sup> Second, when faced with an equipollence of reasons yet still preferring one position over the other, it does not follow that the suspension of judgment does not follow equipollence, but only that the views are *not yet* equipollent.<sup>[60]</sup> If the reader remains unconvinced about the immortality of man or, in other words, if the reader still assents to the proposition ‘all men are mortal,’ the reasons for thinking otherwise are not yet equipollent. What convinces me, to be sure, may not be what convinces you: Modifying existing premises - or adding new ones - may serve to balance out the arguments completely. Does the sceptic deny that knowledge is possible? No. In principle the Pyrrhonist does not deny that knowledge is possible; yet he never claims to have attained it. Knowledge is undesirable, to be sure, since it does not lead to happiness, and it seems that we can never, given antithetical Pyrrhonian arguments, achieve it anyway. We will always meet with an equipollence of reasons, and hence the *epoche*, long before we would ever reach the truth.

## Conclusion

What can be concluded about Pyrrhonian scepticism? I think it can be confidently concluded that the Pyrrhonian Stigma is an inaccurate reflection of Pyrrhonian scepticism. Pyrrhonism is not self-defeating: It is neither a self-refuting nor a contradictory philosophy; it is not incompatible with living and is not, as implicit in many objections raised against it, unrealistic to adopt as a practical philosophy. Rather, as Burnyeat put it “Pyrrhonism is the only attempt in Western thought to carry scepticism to its furthest limit and to live by the result.”<sup>[61]</sup> We can also conclude that there is a fundamentally moral purpose to Pyrrhonian scepticism that is decidedly absent in scepticism’s many modern forms. With the advent of modern philosophy and the legacy of Cartesianism, ‘scepticism’ and ‘epistemology,’ it seems, have become conceptually wed in the literature. Perhaps not surprisingly, modern commentators may simply have this ‘epistemological bias’ when reviewing the ancients.

Hume once remarked that upon hearing the testimony of others he immediately considered with himself whether it was more probable that this person should be deceived or would willfully deceive.<sup>[62]</sup> In this regard (and perhaps only in this regard) Hume really captures what it means to be an every day kind of sceptic. The ‘average’ sceptic doubts because he thinks things incredible, untrustworthy, or unreliable. This is not a Pyrrhonian sceptic. The Pyrrhonian sceptic does not doubt; he argues - he offers reasons for thinking otherwise. Scepticism is not, to put the point in different terms, a simple capacity to negate; it is rather a learned ability to oppose.

Lastly, Aristotle writes, in the very first sentence of his *Metaphysics*, “All human beings desire to know.”<sup>[63]</sup> To contradict Aristotle within his own lifetime was the onset of a whole era of philosophy servings from the Golden Age of Athens to Augustine’s *Contra Academicos*. If the popularity of Aristotle’s quote were inversely measured against the popularity of ancient Greek Scepticism, then it is of little wonder that scepticism has been so neglected.

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[1] See Stallknecht, P. Newton and Robert S. Brumbaugh. *The Spirit of Western Philosophy* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1950). for not mentioning ancient scepticism at all. Also, see Clark, R. L. Stephen. “Ancient Philosophy.” *The Oxford History of Western Philosophy*. Ed. Anthony Kenny. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). for briefly mentioning ancient scepticism.

[2] In addition to Descartes and Hume, philosophers who were either sceptics themselves or deeply interested in scepticism include Augustine, James, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Locke, Berkeley, and Kant, to name only a few.

[3] Unless otherwise stated, by ‘scepticism’ I mean those of the Pyrrhonian inclination rather than those of the Academic.

[4] Kurtz, Paul, *The New Skepticism. Inquiry and Reliable Knowledge* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1992) 33.

[5] Groarke, Leo, *Greek Scepticism. Anti-Realist Trends in Ancient Thought* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990) 31-49.

[6] Hiley, David R., *Philosophy in Question. Essays on a Pyrrhonian Theme* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 10.

[7] Groarke 31-49.

[8] Kurtz 35.

[9] Hiley 10.

[10] Hiley 10.

[11] Hiley 10.

[12] Barnes, Johnathan, Introduction to the *Outlines of Scepticism* (see below) xxvii.

[13] Groarke 4.

[14] Hookway, Christopher, *Scepticism* (London: Routledge, 1990) 1.

[15] Barnes, Intro. *Outlines*. xv.

[16] In part, Sextus’ *Against the Mathematicians* contains the same arguments contained in the *Outlines*.

[17] Hiley 10.

[18] Barnes, Intro. *Outlines*. xix.

[19] Sextus Empiricus. *Outline of Scepticism* (UK: Cambridge University Press. Eds. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes, 2000) 1.10. From this point forward I will follow convention and refer to the *Outlines* in the abbreviated *PH*.

[20] ‘Opposition’ and ‘antithesis’ are not my own terms. Groarke makes extensive use of them.

[21] PH1.29

[22] Kurtz 37.

[23] Groarke 8-12.

[24] Hookway 2.

[25] Russell, Bertrand, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: Urwine Paperbacks, 1984) 234.

[26] Bergmann, Gustav, *Meaning and Existence*. Quoted From Groarke 8.

[27] Hookway 3.

[28] Blackburn, Simon, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 52. The anecdote of *Buridan's ass* was probably used as a counterexample to refute Jean Buridan's claim that that choice is delayed until reason has decided on a course of action.

[29] Groarke 11.

[30] Milton and Shipka, *Philosophy: Paradox and Discovery*. Quoted from Groarke 9.

[31] Hume, David, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993) 110.

[32] Groarke 13.

[33] Hume 109-10.

[34] Groarke 13.

[35] Groarke 13.

[36] PH1.13.

[37] PH1.23.

[38] PH1.24.

[39] PH1.24.

Interesting to point out that the sceptics operated with an inherited and highly restrictive concept of knowledge - propositional knowledge. Propositional knowledge is knowledge of facts; to know that 'the city of Victoria is located on an island in the Pacific ocean' is to know that 'Victoria is North West of Vancouver.' If we include alternative (modern) concepts of knowledge and try to find out how the ancients would have dealt with them the result is a sweeping characterisation of the (perceived) inadequacies of the sceptical position generally.

Ultimately there is little surprising about why the sceptics tacitly adopted propositional knowledge as the prototype of sceptical attack: propositional knowledge, to my mind, was the most dominant (although not the only) form of knowledge throughout antiquity. Propositional knowledge is commonplace, for example, in Stoic metaphysical determinism, Democretian and Epicurean atomism, Aristotelian 'natural' philosophy, and Platonic idealism.

Working with such a limited concept of knowledge, the sceptics are unable to deal either with *procedural* or *experiential* knowledge. Procedural knowledge is the knowledge of 'knowing how.' Mastering a series of propositions will not enable *x* to swim; in fact, *x* would likely drown. Similarly, if *x* is to know what a pineapple tastes like, it is necessary that *x* actually tastes a pineapple. Until *x* has 'pineapple experience,' to be sure, *x* is ignorant of the knowledge that is to be gained from tasting one. Doubtless it would be absurd for the sceptic to claim, as a matter of fact, that *x* really doesn't know what a pineapple tastes like or that *x* really doesn't know how to swim.

In regards to procedural knowledge, recall the category of 'everyday observances' Sextus referred to as the 'teaching of expertise.' Operating, as the sceptic does, in accordance with these 'everyday observances,' does not exclude the procedure involved in learning; *x*, to be sure, has 'gone through the motions.' The sceptic could, therefore, easily accommodate the kind of knowledge involved in swimming.

Likewise, 'nature's guidance' - which includes thought and perception - can easily accommodate different perceptual experiences. Such experiences, of course, would include the taste of a pineapple.

[40] Hiley 11.

[41] Even during antiquity unfounded accusations paint the sceptic into a corner fantastically representing him as naive and careless. Diogenes Laertius, a biographer in the third century BC, reports that in an attempt to live a life of consistency Pyrrho went out of his way for nothing "taking no precaution, but fancying all risks as they came, whether carts, precipices, dogs...and generally leaving nothing to the arbitrament of the senses" (Groarke 85). As the story goes Pyrrho's followers had to constantly watch over him, lest he meet with an early demise (Ibid. 85). Despite Nietzsche's unflattering characterization of Laertius as by "accident the clumsy watchmen guarding treasures whose value he does not know" (Blackburn 106), anecdotes about Pyrrho's disposition seem to have gone along way in propagating the misappropriation of Pyrrhonian principles to real life. It is difficult to square such characterizations, but Laertius' comments are not without controversy (Groarke 85-6). Moreover, the value (and presumably the reliability) of Laertius' 'sceptical genealogy' was doubted even within his own lifetime (Barnes, Intro. *Outlines*. xvii). Fortunately, what we do know of Pyrrhonism, all be it limited almost exclusively to the *Outlines*, creates a contrary and far more consistent impression of a Pyrrhonian philosopher.

Adding to the careless and conflicting secondary literature, Thomas Reid once observed that “‘the great Pyrrho himself forgot his principles on some occasions,’ being said to have been in such a passion with his cook, who had probably not roasted his dinner to his mind, that with the spit in hand and the meat upon it, he pursued him even into the market place” (Hookway 4). Pyrrho, in fact, is not the star of this story. Rather, it is one of Pyrrho’s followers, Eurylocheus, who, as pointed out by Laertius, “fell short of his [Pyrrhonian] principles” (Groarke 89). In fact, Pyrrho’s devout follower Timon of Phlius (c. 320-230 BC) described his mentor’s demeanor in dramatically different terms: “This Pyrrho, this heart doth feign to know, whence peace of mind doth freely flow, why among men thou like a god dost show” (Ibid. 87). As it happens, Laertius reports that Pyrrho was made a high priest in his local of Elis, where, incidentally, a statue of him was erected in the marketplace (Ibid. 87). Of course, nothing has really been ‘proved’ here. Anecdotal evidence, after all, only goes so far. All things considered, however, there seem to be better reasons - and more of them - to favor Pyrrho’s demeanor as an accurate reflection of his philosophy rather than merely characterizing him as hypocritical. Suffice to say, Pyrrhonism (and Greek scepticism in general) has suffered the neglect and misunderstanding of both scholars and philosophers alike.

[42] Consider: Call the proposition ‘knowledge is unattainable’  $p$ , and call the proposition ‘assent or denial ought to be withheld’  $q$ . If, according to the sceptic,  $p$  is true, then  $\sim p$  is true as well. Let me explain: If knowledge is unattainable ( $p$ ), then it follows that  $p$  itself is unattainable. The acceptance of  $p$  is the acceptance of knowledge; yet the acceptance of  $p$  is the acceptance that knowledge is attainable, namely,  $\sim p$ . Therefore, the sceptic refutes himself. Similarly, if, according to the sceptic,  $q$  is true (‘assent or denial ought to be withheld’), then the sceptic should neither affirm nor deny  $q$ ; yet the sceptic affirms  $q$  (which is a denial that  $q$  ( $\sim q$ )). Hence the sceptic yet again refutes himself.

[43] Barnes, Intro. *Outlines*. xxii.

[44] Sedley, David, “The Motivation of Greek Skepticism,” in Myles Burnyeat, ed. *The Skeptical Tradition* (London: The University of California Press Ltd., 1983) 12.

[45] Sedley 12.

[46] Sedley 12.

[47] Hookway 19.

[48] Groarke 12.

[49] Barnes, Intro. *Outlines*. xxii.

[50] Barnes, Intro. *Outlines*. xxii.

[51] Barnes, Intro. *Outlines*. xxii.

[52] Barnes, Intro. *Outlines*. xxii.

[53] Barnes, Intro. *Outlines*. xxii.

[54] Barnes, Intro. *Outlines*. xxii.

[55] PH1.197.

[56] PH1.198.

[57] PH1.8.

[58] PH 1.33.

[59] Barnes, Intro. *Outlines*. xxi.

[60] Barnes, Intro. *Outlines*. xxi.

[61] Burnyeat, M.F., “Can the Sceptic Live His Skepticism,” in Myles Burnyeat, ed. *The Skeptical Tradition* (London: The University of California Press Ltd., 1983) 118.

[62] Hume 77.

[63] Aristotle, “Metaphysics.” trans. Terence Irwine and Gail Fine, in *Aristotle: Selections*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1995) 980a.