



The Sceptics Edwyn Bevan

As soon as the human spirit awoke to see in the old familiar world an enigma, a problem, an unexplored mystery, there were many confident enough to undertake its discovery, ready to hold a belief as to what lay beyond the field of the senses to believe and affirm. It was this buoyant hope which nerved Greek philosophy when it first came into being with Thales and the Ionians, which nerved it all through its long spiritual travail up to Plato and Aristotle, to Zeno and Epicurus. And yet in the very effort there came ever and again the revulsion of despair, the sick feeling that the effort was no good, that there was no winning any real knowledge from the void. That disconsolate sceptical note is heard even in the young adventurous days of Greek philosophy in Xenophanes:

The certain truth there is no man who knows, nor ever shall be, about the Gods and all the things whereof I speak. Yea, even if a man should chance to say something utterly right, still he himself knows it not: there is nothing anywhere but guessing (Frag. 34).

or in Empedocles :

When they have but looked upon the little portion of their own life, they fly away in a moment, like smoke, persuaded each one of that particular thing only with which he has come into contact as they are driven hither and thither, and yet each one flatters himself that he has found the whole ; so far are these things beyond the reach of men, not to be seen of the eye, or heard of the ear, or comprehended with the mind (Frag 2).

The very affirmations which philosophers made, from Thales onwards, produced in many minds a reaction of doubt, for affirmation was soon clashing with affirmation, and the theory which was promulgated one day as the latest truth was before long superseded by another. In the philosophers whom we have quoted, the sceptical doubt haunted only the background of their consciousness and did not find utterance except in momentary phases of thought. But there must have been many people whom the disputes of philosophers discouraged from putting any faith in philosophy at all. Such people may have been much more numerous than the fragments of old Greek philosophical writing show. For scepticism is naturally less vocal than dogmatism. We know something of the men who had a theory to propagate, and contended for it with voice or pen, but we know nothing of all those who shrugged their shoulders and went their way. It is only where scepticism itself becomes a formulated theory that it leaves record of itself in the history of philosophy.

The man who is reckoned the Founder of Scepticism as a definite tradition was a contemporary of the men who founded the two great dogmatic systems of Stoicism and Epicureanism. Pyrrho of Elis was there to mark all dogma with a query. We cannot be exactly sure what he taught, since he left no writing and stands rather as a strong problematic figure at the back of the Sceptical tradition, just as Socrates stands behind the Platonic. We know for one thing that he

went with Alexander the Great to India. Wild statements have often been made as to Indian influences travelling Westward. In this case there is good ground for believing that upon a day more than two thousand years ago, under the sky of the Punjab, this Greek, his mind full of Homer and Democritus, did come face to face with dark impassive *sannyasis*, their minds full of another world of things. It is a moment which kindles the historical imagination. Unfortunately just here, where the contact is provable, no transmission of Indian doctrine can be traced. It was only the memory of that strange impassiveness and detachment which Pyrrho seems to have carried away; it was that which he strove in his afterlife to reproduce. Probably the Indian sages had no particular desire to instruct the alien from the West, and ignorance of each other's language would in any case have limited the communication of metaphysical ideas.

What Pyrrho taught we can only know from the accounts of others, notably of his disciple, Timon of Phlius. Apparently the two main influences in his scepticism were, on the one hand, Democritus, who had laid stress on the merely subjective character of sensation...and on the other hand the Sophistic criticism. Democritus had had his own dogma...and here Pyrrho would not follow. He took up the old contention of Protagoras. Every affirmation could be logically confronted with its opposite: the clash of dogmas was not something to be surprised at: the conflict belonged to the very nature of dogma. This was the principle of *isostheneia*, equal strength on both sides of every question, which became a stock part of Greek Scepticism. It really, I suppose, was doing no more than giving a stereotyped label and formulation to what had been the inarticulate feeling all along of those whom the endless controversies of the schools had repelled. Many a plain man, as I suggested, had probably determined in consequence not to bother himself with philosophy, and this was just what Pyrrho's wisdom came to, *ataraxia*, not to bother oneself. The unhappy desire to know was the cause of all the fever and fret, the polemical passion and torturing doubt. Once grasp that the desire was essentially futile, that you could let the mind play and *hold it back* all the while from fixed belief (*epochē*), and there was no reason why you should not be perfectly happy and contented in nescience. It was a wonderful deliverance to realize that you need not mind not knowing. This, apparently, was Pyrrho's gospel. It was not inspired by an acute intellect analysing the process of thought and coming to a sceptical conclusion; it was strikingly different from the modern Agnosticism which often goes with a vigorous interest in 'Science'; it was the expression of weariness, of disgust with the endless strife of tongues, of the relief found in mere ceasing from effort and stagnation. In the fragments of the satirical poems of Timon, which are our first-hand evidence for this early phase of Scepticism, the hatred of wind-bags, of empty talk, of the pretentious assumption of knowledge, is the one motive running through all. It is really so simple not to bother and to have done with all the fuss.

This, I suggested, was strikingly different from modern Agnosticism. In its spirit and practical working it does seem to me utterly unlike; but one must allow that if one looks at its theoretical first principles, there is rather striking resemblance. The principle familiar to us in modern Agnosticism, that you can know phenomena and their sequences but you cannot know the Reality which lies behind them, was already enunciated almost in the same words by ancient Scepticism. 'We do not use our sceptical phrases', says Sextus Empiricus, * about everything in the world without distinction. We use them only of things inaccessible to the senses and investigated by the way of dogma. The phenomenon we affirm as an appearance to ourselves; we do not make positive statements about the nature of the external objects in themselves' (Sext. Emp. *Hyp.* i. 208). Man (as distinguished from other animals) has in the sphere of phenomena a faculty of following the process of things and retaining it. In virtue of this he remembers what phenomena he has observed accompanying each other, what preceding and what coming after, so that when the first members of the sequence are presented to him the

rest are revived' (Sext. *Emp. adv. math.* viii. 288). Thus, as is explained in another passage, the Sceptic did not refrain from inferring fire when he saw smoke, or a wound when he saw a scar. (*Emp. Hyp.* ii. 102). These passages are taken from a writer of the second century A.D., Sextus Empiricus, but the principles enunciated seem to go back to Timon, the immediate disciple of Pyrrho. A sentence is preserved from [him]: 'That honey is sweet I refuse to assert; that it appears sweet, I fully grant.' In another work the line occurred: 'The phenomenon is always valid'. And he maintained that he had not gone against the common practice of humanity (Diog. Laert. ix. 105). Now such principles, one would think, have only to be extended in their application in order to give us all that is required by modern scientific Agnosticism. The ancient Sceptic, however, never contemplated such extension. You could only, according to him, infer something you did not see from something you did see, when you had actually observed those things, or precisely similar things, in connection. A theory, for instance, like the atomic theory, or, to take a favourite instance of Sextus, the theory of pores in the body, was repudiated, because atoms and pores were things which could never come within the range of sense-perception. That is to say, the immense part which working hypothesis has played in modern science was far from his thought.

There seems to us so obvious a line dividing scientific hypotheses which are based upon precise observation and experiment, accurate measurement and mathematical formulae, from metaphysical and ethical theories, into which numerical measurement cannot enter, that we find it hard, perhaps, to realize that from the standpoint of the ancient Sceptic the difference between physical and metaphysical hypotheses was much less plain. There were plenty of physical hypotheses current in the fourth century B.C. some, like the atomic theory, anticipations of recent scientific theories but in default of all instruments for, minute observation and measurement, they were all shots in the dark (Sext. *Emp. adv. math.* viii. 325). What science could there be in the modern sense without the microscope, without the thermometer, without even the watch? The modern scientist must find it hard to transport himself in imagination into such a state of things.

What seems to be the better tradition as to the Sceptical school asserts that Timon of Phlius left no disciple (Diog. Laert. ix. 115). The school, as a school, ceased. But its soul, one might say, migrated elsewhere and reappeared in the Academy, which thereby entered another phase of its history. Timon seems for the last forty years of his long life (from about 275 to 235 B.C.) to have made Athens his home. The man who for the greater part of this time sat in the seat of Plato was Arcesilaus, a native of Pitane in Asia Minor. He, too, is among the philosophers who left no writings, and whom it is therefore hard for us now to estimate at their real value. We only know of Arcesilaus that his personality was one which shone conspicuously in the eyes of contemporaries. 'By a singular conjunction at this moment,' wrote Eratosthenes with enthusiasm, 'one city wall contained two philosophers of such eminence as Aristo and Arcesilaus' (Strabo, i. 2, 2, C. 15)—hardly two names which occur to us now as luminaries of this magnitude among all the great names of Athens. The notices make us think of Arcesilaus as a man of aristocratic temper, with a certain elegant splendour in his way of living, for he had wealth and knew how to use it, at once fastidious and generous. He was, we gather, one of those minds for whom the intellectual play of 'for' and 'against' had its fascination, apart from the desire to arrive at a stable conclusion. Argument was the breath of his nostrils. Under the new system which he introduced into the Academy, instead of an authoritative lecture ex cathedra, a thesis was set up by one of the students, whom Arcesilaus proceeded to cross-examine in Socratic fashion, or he himself argued first on one and then on the other side of a question. For such a mind the doctrine of Pyrrho, which Timon was here in Athens to expound, had natural attraction. It would appeal to him, not as a relief from endless dispute, but as

keeping the possibility of argument endlessly open. It could never come to rest in a dogmatic conclusion. Arcesilaus took over the Pyrrhonic Scepticism so fully that it became a question what monopoly he left to the school which had originally enunciated it. Timon seems to have been at pains, so long as Arcesilaus lived, to show that the new Scepticism of the Academy was not of the genuine brand: the Academy was still in bondage. 'What are you doing here, where we free men are?' he is said to have called out to Arcesilaus once, when he saw him passing (Diog. Laert. ix. 114). And Sextus Empiricus tries to show how the shreds of dogmatism still adhered to Arcesilaus and the Academics. What he alleges, however, to prove it does not seem borne out by what we can ascertain of their real doctrine. Arcesilaus, so Sextus says, affirmed as an objective truth that the holding back of assent was a good, whereas the true Sceptic only stated that it seemed such to him (Sext. Emp. *Hyp.* i. 232, 233). If this had been the case, Arcesilaus would, of course, have been convicted of the shreds of dogmatism; but according to other accounts the Scepticism of Arcesilaus did not stop short of declaring freely that the unknowableness of Reality was itself doubtful (Cic. *Ac. Post.* i. 45). This, of course, purported to meet the obvious objection which the opponents of Scepticism always brought up against it: 'At any rate you assert your own fundamental principle, that the Truth behind phenomena is unknowable.' And the stock answer given by the later Sceptics seems to have been that even their fundamental principle was put forth with a query: the Sceptical philosophy was like a drug which removed itself as well as other substances from the body (Sext. Emp. *Hyp.* i, 206). The philosopher hard-pressed not seldom finds refuge in a figure.

The distinctive note in the Scepticism of Arcesilaus, so far as we can trace it, was given by its special direction against the new dogmatic system being constructed in Athens, which we considered in our first two lectures. If on the one side a great practical need impelled the teachers of the new dogma, on the other side there was something in the Hellenic spirit which could not but rise up in opposition. And the Stoic epistemology, framed under the exigency of finding some absolutely certain basis for dogma, did, as we saw, offer only too easy a mark for philosophic criticism. It was a weak part in the defences which naturally drew down the attack of a man like Arcesilaus. The Stoic certainty was built upon the *kataleptikē phantasia*, the impression which left no room for error, because the reality behind it could only be one thing. It all stood upon the assumption that there were impressions which left no possible alternative. And this is just what Arcesilaus denied. And if there were no such impressions, the Stoic sage who gave his absolute belief with entire inerrancy was a figment. On the other hand, the Wise Man, Arcesilaus said, never believed heavily in that way; he never, as it were, let his centre of gravity go over upon any conviction; he saved himself from error by always withholding his assent.

About eighty years after the death of Arcesilaus, the seat of Plato passed to one whose personality stamped itself upon the later philosophical tradition—the Cyrenaean Carneades. Unfortunately, like Arcesilaus, Carneades left practically no writing behind him, so that all we know of his teaching comes through his disciple Clitomachus. Let us look at the disciple before we turn to the master. Clitomachus is interesting as a figure, because he was an example of the spread of Hellenism in that age among people not of Greek blood. He was a Semite from Carthage, and his original name was Hasdrubal. Besides his Greek works, he seems to have written books in Punic, rendering no doubt the conceptions of Greek philosophy in a tongue akin to Hebrew books which would, one may suppose, be of singular interest to-day to Rabbinical scholars. The time came when this alien sat as master in Plato's Academy, for the Greeks apparently had no prejudice against men of non-Hellenic blood who were qualified by education to enter their society. If Carneades did not write at all, his disciple Hasdrubal-Clitomachus made up for it by the vast volume of his writing—more than 400 books, we are

told. Through them the voice of Carneades reached subsequent generations.

Carneades was like his predecessor Arcesilaus in his passion for argument, his way of exhibiting the strength of both the opposing sides on each question, but one gathers that in contrast with the urbanity and aristocratic manner of Arcesilaus, there was something uncouth and violent, about him. We hear of his uncut hair and neglected nails, and how the director of the gymnasium neighbouring the place where he taught had to send him a message begging him not to shout so. There was a destructive eagerness about him, which made him take a wicked delight in tearing to pieces all the dogmatic systems established in the schools. His cleverness and command of words made him terribly effective, and people went to his lectures to learn rhetoric no less than to learn philosophy. One cannot wonder that when a man of this kind electrified Rome in 156 B.C. by a brilliant oration on the thesis that righteousness was based entirely on convenience, stalwart old conservatives like Cato the Censor saw in Greek philosophy a danger to the State.

So far as one can make out, the principles of Carneades did not differ essentially from those which the Academy had already derived from Arcesilaus. The importance of Carneades is probably rather to be found in the rhetorical cleverness which gave much wider currency and popularity to the Sceptical arguments throughout the Greek world, and in his furnishing the opponents of established beliefs in Providence, in Divination, in Fate with an armoury of stock arguments, such as we meet with in Cicero and the later Sceptics. If Carneades made any original contribution to philosophy, it was apparently in his elaborating a theory of belief based on degrees of probability. The putting forward of probability as a substitute for the certain knowledge claimed by the dogmatists was what people specially connected with the name of Carneades. His theory seems to have taken its start here too from the doctrine of Arcesilaus. We shall see in a moment, when we come to the Sceptic rule of living, that Arcesilaus had found a guiding principle in the idea of the 'reasonable'. The 'probable' of Carneades was, modern books tell us, the 'reasonable' of Arcesilaus, only transferred from the sphere of conduct to the sphere of knowledge. The transference was perhaps not as important in its working out, as it might appear. The 'probable' has indeed reference to the question 'What is true?' whereas the 'reasonable' has reference to the question 'What is good to do?' in so far Carneades may naturally seem to turn his interest from practice to knowledge. But when we look at the actual context of appeals to the probable, we find that the intellectual illumination is always represented, not as the satisfaction of a speculative curiosity about the world, but as affording light for practice. Perhaps Carneades felt more vividly than Arcesilaus that conduct could be reasonable only if it were guided by a judgement of some kind knowledge or conjecture as to what things are. Hence, Scepticism having destroyed the basis of certain belief, Carneades felt the need of his system of probability. The older Sceptics had said, 'The Wise Man will always withhold his assent and, knowledge being unattainable, will keep his mind immune from opinion.' Carneades seems to have found this not quite satisfactory. It was plain, of course, that if you allowed the Wise Man to hold an opinion you exposed him to error. Well, you must take the risk of that, Carneades said: it is no good trying to get the Wise Man out of the necessity of giving any sort of assent, because to act on an hypothesis is to assent to it practically, and the Wise Man, we are all agreed, must act sometimes. Hence Carneades boldly maintained in opposition to his predecessors that the Wise Man would hold opinions; only his opinions would be limited to the sphere of things which determined conduct, i.e. phenomena not the background of phenomena, gods and so on and would be regulated according to degrees of probability. The ferment which the restless criticism of Carneades and Clitomachus spread through the schools no doubt worked more or less for centuries. But their successors in the Academy, Philo of Larissa and still more Antiochus of Ascalon, found the Sceptical position an uncomfortable one in the long run to

maintain, and with Antiochus the Academy practically surrendered to the Stoa. The Sceptical spirit had to find a new incarnation, and found it in a man who professed to go back behind the Academy to the purer Scepticism of Pyrrho and Timon. This was a man from the old Cretan city of Cnossos, who lived and wrote in Alexandria, Aenesidemus. It seems to be made out that he was a contemporary of Cicero's, probably a younger contemporary, whom Cicero either never heard of or did not think a person of enough account to mention. With Aenesidemus, however, Scepticism entered upon a new period of life which extended over the first two centuries of the Roman Empire, especially, it would seem, in connection with the 'Empiric' school of medicine. It is this concluding phase of ancient Scepticism which has delivered to us the one systematic first-hand exposition of it which we possess, the treatises of Sextus Empiricus, dating from the second half of the second century A. D.

There does not seem any ground for regarding either Aenesidemus or any of his followers as thinkers who contributed any really new thoughts to the Sceptical tradition. The substance of Sextus Empiricus probably goes back to Timon, four or five hundred years before. The fundamental principle that the phenomenon alone, each man's sensations and inferences as a fact of consciousness, was certain this was all through the same. The great argument against dogmatic assurance, the disagreement of one individual with another, the disagreement of the same individual with himself under varying circumstances, this too was the same. In whatever field of things disagreement was possible, in that field there could be no dogmatic assurance, because the question could always be raised whether what determined my belief in opposition to some other man's was not the personal equation in some form, behind which I obviously could not get, however much I might try, because it was involved in my very efforts to think it away. The only field of certain knowledge therefore left was the field where agreement was universal (Sext. Emp. *adv. math.* viii. 8), 'common sense', in the literal meaning of the phrase the field of sensation. The sensation of white, for instance, or the sensation of sweetness is the same for everybody, although the colour and taste of a particular thing might differ according to the individual percipient (Sext. Emp. *adv. math.* viii. 240). And all that we could do, if we did not mean to step into the dark region of things Unknowable was just to remember what sensations we had found coupled in experience and, when we met with one, to expect the other.

What Aenesidemus did was not to produce a new variety of Scepticism, but, at a time when every one was turning to some form of dogmatism, he gathered up the Sceptical criticism which the schools, he saw, had dodged without meeting, and launched it again upon the world in a more systematic, more closely reasoned, more compact and manageable form, a stereotyped series of arguments. This was the significance of the ten 'Modes' connected with his name a presentation in detail of the kinds of disagreement intended by Sceptics when they made disagreement a ground for the withholding of assent. The first Mode is the disagreement in perception and physical qualities between men and other animals, the second is disagreement between different sorts of men, the third between the different senses in the same individual, and so on, ending up with disagreements in the sphere of conduct, customs, and laws, of mythological and philosophic belief. Similarly, Aenesidemus drew up a list of eight fallacies committed by dogmatic philosophers in professing to give an account of the causes behind phenomena. Of course, all this tabulation of the Sceptical arguments under fixed heads was a great furtherance to their popular circulation, even if it added nothing to their substance. You can find them in Sextus Empiricus and in the summary of Sceptical teaching given by Laertius Diogenes.

One cannot say that the writings of Sextus Empiricus, although they contain many interesting things, are great literature, and often there are pages together of nothing but quibbling and logic-chopping, a mere juggling with counters. But the Sceptical School in the second century

A. D. had also among its adherents the most brilliant literary man of the twilight of Hellenism, Lucian of Samosata. Anybody who wants to read the case for Scepticism in a more agreeable form than the treatises of Sextus had better turn to the dialogue of Lucian which bears the name of *Hermotimus*. Many people have read an abridged and somewhat altered version of it in *Marius the Epicurean*. It seems to me a little work not unworthy to be set with Plato's. Here, too, we have the playful irony and the dramatic touches, and behind it all the pathos, the inner tragedy, which lie at the heart of scepticism. The edge of that light mockery bites as shrewdly, its arrows are as penetrating to-day, it seems to me, as eighteen centuries ago. Pater has made Hermotimus into a young man; this misses a point in the original where he is a man well on in life, who for twenty years has been labouring to find Truth along the Stoic path and not attained; he hopes that he may attain, perhaps in twenty years more. And what Lucian presses upon him is just the old Sceptic argument from the disagreement of the schools. How did Hermotimus know in the first instance which guide, out of all those who offered, he should choose to follow? How could he estimate the value of the different schools without having already the knowledge he was setting out to seek? The far-off City, whose citizens are all blissful and righteous, in the radiance of an unearthly peace ah, if one knew the way thither, would it not be worth while to throw everything else to the winds, to break every tie, in order to reach it! 'Once I heard an old man describing what it is like there, and he exhorted me to follow him to the City. He would be my guide himself and inscribe my name on its registers, when I came there, and make me a member of one of its tribes and get me admitted to his own phratry, so that I too might be blessed among the blessed. "But I hearkened not unto him" as I was young and foolish then, fifteen years ago.... Yes, I myself, Hermotimus, have the same desire in my heart that you have, and there is nothing, if I could have my wish, that I should prefer to this. If the City were near and plain for everybody to see, be sure that I should have started for it long ago without question and been its citizen now these many years.' (Lucian, *Herm.* 24, 25) But the way that was just what no one knew, and it was better, the Sceptic convinced Hermotimus, to give up the vain hope and shun the philosopher who stirs it up in one's heart as one would a mad dog.

The doctrines of the old philosophic schools, the soul a fiery vapour, the god that is the ethereal envelope of the Universe, the atoms that fall downwards through infinite space or swerve spontaneously without external cause any old system as we see it now, looking back, appears so crude, so naive in many of its assertions, that it would be easy, we feel, for us, if we could enter one of those schools with all our modern knowledge, to show how rashly and absurdly those theories were building upon the void. But really I don't know that we could say anything more telling or more apt than the old Sceptics did actually say. The warning voice had sounded out clear to the world and was heard through all the places where men disputed and reasoned; the four hundred volumes of Hasdrubal-Clitomachus, the compact effective arguments of Aenesidemus, the penetrating irony of Lucian, all these things were there, palpable and audible, during the centuries when the determination of the people of the Greco-Roman world slowly matured to put themselves under the authority of a new dogma. Men did not answer the Sceptical arguments: they simply went past them, turned their backs upon them.

Why was this? Why was the logic of the Sceptics impotent to arrest this movement of the human spirit? I think that as we look at the history more closely, we see why. If in the profession of a dogmatic belief the asserter means 'There is no possibility of my being mistaken: it is as objectively certain that what I maintain is true as that any sensation, which you have, exists as a sensation'; if this is what dogmatism means, then the Sceptical argument was a complete and unanswerable refutation of the dogmatic position. And this is very much what dogmatism did mean, in the Stoic, form. The Wise Man was above any possibility of error: the *katalēptikē*

phantasia gave him as certain a knowledge of the Stoic dogmas as he had that two and two were four; he would never hold an opinion; he knew. What the Sceptics proved was that there is nothing, except sensation—to have been quite thorough they ought to have said immediately present sensation as to the existence of which one must not admit the abstract possibility of error. Any inference from immediate sensation (we may add, any memory of past sensation) *may* be a delusion. So far the Sceptics were logically triumphant. But there was one respect in which the Sceptical philosophy hopelessly broke down; it broke down just where all Agnosticism must break down, before the exigencies of life—before the fact that man is not only a spectator of Reality, but a maker of it. If we were minds suspended in space merely watching what went on, we might well, so far as I can see, take the advice of the Sceptic to hold back from all belief; we might simply wait and see what happened. But we have to act, to-day and to-morrow and all the days to come. It was, when all was said and done, because men wanted guidance for action that they turned, in spite of all the Sceptics could urge, to dogmatic systems—to Stoicism, to Epicureanism, and later on to Neoplatonism and the Church. There was an imperious need which the dogmatic systems set out to supply, and which Scepticism could neither supply nor set aside. That was felt by the old opponents of Scepticism, when to all the Sceptical arguments they returned ever again the answer that consistent Scepticism would reduce man to inactivity. It was an objection which went ‘home, and which the Sceptics were at great pains to rebut. And their attempt to do so is the most pitiful thing imaginable. What had Scepticism to say, when men put the question to it, How then were they to live? In reviewing the successive phases of Scepticism, I have put their attempts to answer that question aside in order that we might consider the practical conclusion of the Sceptical philosophy by itself at the end. The answer of Scepticism to that question was in effect: ‘Well, you will just do what other people do: you will conform to the usages of society: you will let yourself go with the stream.’ Timon, the first exponent of Pyrrhonism in writing, laid stress, as we have seen, on the fact that he had not broken with ordinary conventions. In the Academy Scepticism was in fusion with another and more aristocratic spirit derived from Plato, and had to find some principle of conduct which seemed less like surrendering one’s soul to the common herd, a principle which at any rate represented some individual choice, some autonomy. Arcesilaus, according to our report, found this principle is what approved itself to the agent as reasonable, and he seems curiously to have adduced the Stoic definition of a right action as ‘that for which, when it has been performed, a reasonable defence can be made’ (Sext. Emp. *adv. math.* vii. 158). Probably, this sample of the ethical doctrine of Arcesilaus is merely an *argumentum ad hominem*, a stroke in his standing feud with the Stoics. The Stoics, I think, had been obliged to frame this cumbrous definition of a *kathēkon*, because they wanted to describe it as a reasonable action, whilst on* their theory no action could be really reasonable except one performed *phronimōs* by the ideal Wise Man. Arcesilaus seems to have caught it up and said: ‘Very well, if you admit that an action can be reasonable in a sense, although not performed with the perfect knowledge possessed by the Wise Man, that is all I want as a guide for action, and you cannot urge against my philosophy that it has made all principle for action impossible.’ This does not tell us what Arcesilaus himself understood by ‘the reasonable’, and in default of further explanation we have only a formal phrase without definite content.

Nor when we come to his brilliant successor Carneades do we get any clearer guidance. Carneades had, as we saw, his theory of graduated probability, which was to be applied to practice, but one cannot gather any definite principles of conduct that Carneades himself suggested as the ones to be followed. Of course, all action implies judgements of two kinds, judgements as to what the existing data are, ‘existential’ judgements, and judgements as to what ought to be, as to the new reality to be constituted by our action, value-judgements. In both

sorts of judgement the Wise Man would, according to Carneades, follow probability ; he would form an opinion as to phenomena and their concatenation, and an opinion as to the Good to be realized. But when an instance is given us, it is only a judgement of the first kind; the Wise Man, we are told, would embark on a vessel in virtue of a judgement that it would probably arrive at its destination. When we ask what Carneades took the Good to be, the end to be aimed at in action, we get no answer. Carneades showed a keen debating interest in the positive doctrines of the different schools; he loved to take one or other of them as a thesis, whose strength he could exhibit with all his forensic cleverness, turning round next to defend the opposite view with equal ability. It was he who mapped out the scheme under which all possible answers to the question, ‘What is the good?’ could be logically classified (the ‘Carneadia divisio’). But to any view of his own on that cardinal question he does not seem to have committed himself, nor are we, by scrutinizing the fragments of his teaching which have come down to us, likely to succeed in enucleating one, since even Clitomachus, his assiduous reporter, admitted that he had never been able to discover what his master really thought (Cic. *Ac.* ii. 139).

The later sceptics, Aenesidemus and his line, fell back upon the principle stated at the outset by Timon, convention. The Sceptic rule of practice is clearly explained by Sextus Empiricus. ‘We attend to the appearance of things (fa phalnomena] and live a human life, observing the conditions of such a life, without holding any opinion, since we cannot give up action altogether. This observation of the conditions of life seems to come under four heads; firstly, there is the way marked out by Nature, by which we are so constituted as to have certain sensations and thoughts; secondly, there is the compulsion of our bodily feelings, the hunger that drives us to food, the thirst that drives us to drink, and so on; thirdly, there is the tradition embodied in customs and laws, by which we are taught as a matter of practical life that religion is a good thing and irreligion a bad thing; and, lastly, there is technical instruction, by which we can maintain our activity in the various arts and crafts that have come down to us. But in saying all this we imply no opinion as to truth.’ (Sext. *Emp. Hyp.* i. 23, 24). ‘We follow life (*bios*, the ordinary ways of society) without opinion, so that we may not give up action’ (ib. 226). We live following established laws and customs and natural appetites, without opinion’ (ib 231). ‘We must think meanly of the intelligence of those who suppose that they shut up the Sceptic to inactivity or self-contradiction,’ he says in another frank passage. ‘They fail to see that the Sceptic does not frame his life as a *man* according to the doctrine which he professes as a *philosopher*. So far as he adheres to that, he does not act at all. Only, noticing in an unphilosophic way how things go, he is able to choose some things and shun others. Supposing a tyrant puts constraint upon him to do something abominable, it may be he will be guided in choosing and refusing by such notion of what is fitting as is embodied in the laws and customs of the society to which by birth he belongs. He will also bear hardships more easily than the man of dogmatic beliefs, because his sensation will not have an opinion added to it as an extra (the opinion that his suffering is an evil), as will be there in the case of the other man’ (Sext. *Emp. adv. math.* xi. 162-6). It seems poor comfort to a man in pain to tell him that after all he does not know that his pain is an evil, for the retort is so obvious that he does not know whether it is not. But it was the best comfort the Sceptic had to give. Sextus tries to eke it out by repeating the assertion made by Epicurus, that if pain was severe it did not last long, and if it lasted long it was not severe ; but he does not feel quite satisfied with that, since he breaks out in the end: ‘Well, and if we do feel very great distress, it is not our fault; we suffer because we must, not because we want to; it is all the fault of Nature, “who cares for no law,” as the verse says (Sext. *Emp. adv. math.* xi. 156) This may be true, but is not very helpful. There is one passage in which Sextus strikes a stronger note, ‘What happens to the Sceptic of necessity’, he says, c he accepts bravely’ (Sext. *Emp. adv. math.* 118). One cannot quarrel with the ‘bravely’; but it implies, of course, a belief in certain values which,

if reflected on, carries one far beyond the narrow Sceptical ground.

The regular answer, then, of ancient Scepticism to those who sought from it a guide for conduct was simply to refer them to what happened to be the prevailing practice of their society. So far from furnishing a principle for the criticism and improvement of prevalent convention, it might lend itself to the support of any bad custom. If it liberated the intellect from dogma, it only brought practice the more into bondage. It could not even effectually attack the superstition which dominated so much of the life of the ancient world, since while it was concerned to maintain that every dogma might be false, it had to admit that any superstition might be true. If it would have refused to say '*Credo quia impossibile*', it was obliged to say '*Non nego quia ineptum*'. If you knew absolutely nothing about God, you had no right to say that the popular mythology was any worse representation of Him than the conceptions of the philosopher. We find, therefore, the whole religious tradition of the ancient state, as a system of ritual and mythological imagery, defended on Sceptical principles. 'The Sceptic', says Sextus, 'will be found acknowledging the gods according to the customs of his country and the laws, and doing everything which tends to their proper worship and reverence, but in the region of philosophic inquiry he makes no rash assertion' (Sext. Emp. *adv. math.* ix. 490. In Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* the part of the Sceptic is sustained by one who holds the office of *pontifex* in the Roman state. 'I have always defended and will always defend', he explains, 'the traditional ceremonies of religion, and no argument of any one, learned or simple, will ever make me budge from the belief which I have received from our ancestors as to the worship of the immortal gods. ... If you, as a philosopher, can justify my religion on rational grounds, good: but I am bound to believe our ancestors, even though they give no reason' (Cic. *De nat. de.* iii) and Cotta proceeds by means of the arguments of Carneades and Clitomachus to demolish the proofs which the Stoic has adduced of the Divine government of the world.

The old proud religions of the Greco-Roman world were already, when Sextus wrote, being assailed by an enemy which had caught up the weapons of the philosophic Sceptics, no longer in a mood of academic criticism, but with the passion and intense purpose of a new-found faith. And by Scepticism the old religions tried to paralyse the attack. The defender of Paganism against Christianity in the little dialogue of Minucius is a Sceptic. Just because Nature is dark and the Truth undiscoverable, how much better 'to follow the religious practices handed down to you, to worship the gods whom your parents taught you rather to fear than to know with too close a familiarity, to advance no opinion as to the Divine powers, but to believe the men of old' (Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 6). But Scepticism brought obviously in the long run more hindrance than help to those who sought its aid. For if it enabled them to safeguard the absurdities of the traditional religion from rational attack, it incapacitated them for attacking anything irrational in the new dogma. It was agnostics of the type of Cicero's Cotta and Caecilius in the dialogue of Octavius who prepared the Greco-Roman world to listen without much sense of strangeness to the '*Credo quia impossibile*' of Tertullian.

The ancient world then had found no stable equilibrium. *It was driven on the one hand by its bitter need towards dogmatic systems, such as the Stoic, and on the other driven back from dogmatism into a scepticism which left it void of counsel. Between the two it swung unhappily for generations. Carneades in his theory of graduated probability might seem to have indicated a central position in which it might have settled. But a life directed by the computation of logical probabilities somehow lacks appeal for the human spirit. If besides these three, dogmatism, scepticism, and the calculation of logical probabilities, there is no other possible attitude of the human mind in the face of this Universe, then there would appear no hope but that the tragedy of the ancient world should be ceaselessly repeated till the story of mankind is done. But is there not another possible attitude, which perhaps was implicit in

Christianity from the beginning, though in the formulation of *Octavius* 6. Here again we have a conflation of the Sceptic doctrine with the theory of Posidonius as to the divine childhood of the race. Caecilius stands for the ordinary educated man of the last days of Paganism, to whose body of ideas the old Scepticism and old dogmatism have alike contributed. Christianity the dogmatic, too exclusively intellectual, habit of the Greek world obscured and mistook it? What account, for instance, is to be given of the belief, the loyal confidence, which a man has in his friend? It has surely a certainty as intensely real as the certainty of the dogmatist, and yet if the man represented that certainty as one of inerrant logical deduction, a mathematical certainty, it would be easy for the Sceptic to show the logical possibilities of error at every turn. The very gaps of logical proof which the Sceptic might point out give room for the moral assurance to hold its own, rejoicing: if in friendship we walked all through by sight, and never by faith, what scope would there be for trust? For that trust a friend could tolerate no weaker word than certainty. He would repel even the suggestion that in his attitude to the man he loved he should be guided by a careful computation of probabilities. Certainty? Yes, but if he represented that certainty to be the same as logical, as mathematical certainty, he would put himself in the wrong and be given defenseless into the hand of the Sceptic. And that mistake, I suggest, is just such a mistake as the ancient dogmatists made in defining their attitude to the great Friend behind the Universe, just such a mistake as was made by their successors whose task, it was to formulate the faith of the Christian Church.

Edwyn Bevan. *Stoics and Sceptics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913.

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