



The Philosophy of the Skeptics Frederick Meyer

SIGNIFICANCE

It has been the custom of many historians of Greek philosophy to neglect the concepts of Skepticism. Very often they devote only a few pages to the Skeptics. They regard them as minor incidents in the stream of Greek knowledge and as representatives of a decadent philosophy, thus contrasting the constructive and affirmative philosophies of Plato and Aristotle with the destructive and relativistic philosophies of the Skeptics. Such a view, however, does not rest upon an objective examination of Skeptical philosophy. Thinkers like Carneades and Aenesidemus compare very favorably with the outstanding philosophers of Greece, such as Plato and Aristotle. What the Skeptics lacked in speculative boldness they made up in profound and scintillating criticism.

The Greek Skeptics are particularly significant from the standpoint of modern philosophy, which likewise is based on the method of doubt and which is suspicious of any absolute foundations. In many ways we have returned to the wisdom of the Skeptics, and, like them, we are satisfied with a partial and tentative evaluation of the universe.

While the philosophy of ancient Skepticism was to some extent destructive, it was at the same time a liberating influence. It emphasized the fact that the mind of man must be emancipated from old superstitions and unexamined biases and that without such a purge no valid philosophical speculation can be carried on. Because of this emphasis, Skepticism became the foundation of science. If it had triumphed permanently, Greek science would have been more empirical and would have made a more significant contribution to civilization.

Skepticism, however, was destined to become only an interlude in the intellectual history of ancient times; and, with the rise of the various religious philosophies, its teachings lost their force and were soon forgotten.

Greek Skepticism can be divided into three periods. The first saw the work of such philosophers as Pyrrho and Timon. It was the formative period of Skepticism, during which its attacks were especially directed against ethical absolutism.

The second, or middle, period was under the sway of Arcesilaus and Carneades. Its center was, strangely enough, the Platonic Academy. In this period the Stoics were especially attacked, and the concept of probability was developed in an exact form.

The third period of Skepticism was dominated by medical studies, and during it Skepticism reached its maturity under the leadership of Aenesidemus, Agrippa, and Sextus Empiricus. After these thinkers, the Skeptical influence waned. During the Middle Ages it was almost nonexistent.

THE ORIGIN OF SKEPTICISM

The Skeptical influence was never absent in Greek thought, for the Greek mind, from the very beginning, believed in a tolerant and many-sided interpretation of life and the

universe. The variety of gods, the differences among the religious cults, the contrast between idealism and actuality—all these factors were bound to create a Skeptical attitude. As we have noticed, even in the cosmological period of Greek thinking a marked Skepticism arose, especially in the system of Xenophanes. He stated that all gods are interpreted and evaluated according to human examples and that we project various human traits and idiosyncrasies upon the deities.

THE ORIGIN OF SKEPTICISM

The same criticism was made by Heraclitus, who likewise believed his contemporaries deluded when it came to the worship of the gods. Heraclitus also showed that the universe changes constantly and the senses alone are not to be trusted. Heraclitus exerted a powerful impact upon the Skeptics by his concept of relativity and his belief that opposites are one. The Skeptics, on the other hand, did not accept the affirmative part of his philosophy, for unlike the Stoics they did not believe that the universe is governed by reason and that all change exemplifies definite cosmic laws.

Besides Heraclitus, the influence of Democritus is noteworthy. The latter, as we have noted, had a deep influence on the Epicureans. The Skeptics also appreciated him; from him they absorbed an understanding of the mechanical arrangement of nature, namely, that necessity governs everything, and a touch of agnosticism regarding the existence of the gods. Incidentally, the ethical theory of Democritus also played a role in Skepticism, for he believed in cheerfulness, which was to be the result of proper intellectual and emotional orientation. The Skeptics, in a similar vein, maintained that a correct intellectual attitude leads to moral emancipation of the individual.

Even more influential than Democritus in their impact on Skepticism were the Sophists. To them, as we have noted, the fundamental problem of philosophy was man; and they adhered to relative rather than universal standards. But the difference between the Sophists and the Skeptics lies in the fact that the Sophists did not arrange their doubts in a systematic manner, whereas the Skeptics developed a most coherent and well-defined philosophy.

The Sophists, it must also be remembered, were teachers of rhetoric. They believed it possible to teach the art of public speaking and statesmanship. The Skeptics, on the other hand, did not have a high regard for social and political affairs. They believed more strongly than the Sophists in living apart from society. Of course, certain exceptions can be noted, especially in the case of Carneades, who represented Athens in a very important diplomatic mission to Rome. Generally speaking, however, the statement holds true. The Sophists lived in a climactic period of Greek development, while the Skeptics were living in an age already showing signs of decline and disintegration.

The development of Skepticism was also aided by Socrates. To the Skeptics, Socrates was noteworthy because of his method of questioning. Like Socrates, the Skeptics stressed self-examination; but, unlike him, they did not arrive at categorical conclusions. They rejected Socrates' view of the world as governed by Providence; instead, they appealed to a strictly scientific interpretation of the universe. Still, we must not minimize the influence of Socrates on Skepticism, for many of the Skeptics used the same method. They, too, had the market place as their classroom; they, too, regarded themselves as gadflies; and they, too, thought it their task to make their fellow-citizens less complacent and less pretentious in their views of religion and morality.

The direct successors of Socrates, such as the Megarics, the Cynics, and the Cyrenaics, stimulated the development of Skepticism by raising many questions regarding the validity of sense knowledge and by studying various logical fallacies. The nominalism of the

Cynics and Cyrenaics certainly was a preliminary attack against all universal standards. We find many of the same arguments in the Skeptics, who, however, were more extreme in their denial of universal truth.

Strangely enough, the philosophy of Plato also became a tool of the Skeptics. Not that they believed in the theory of Ideas, but they used the Platonic arguments in their thesis that the physical world is subject to change and that man's perception is not to be trusted. Plato had made a basic distinction between opinion and knowledge. The Skeptics reduced all knowledge to mere opinion and thus indicated that no absolute conclusions can be held.

Many of the arguments of the Skeptics resemble the arguments of Epicureanism. Especially in the realm of religion is the similarity between the two movements striking. Like the Epicureans, the Skeptics did not believe in Providence; nor did they accept divination. Therefore their philosophy bears a completely scientific character.

It has been occasionally suggested that Buddhism exerted an influence on the Skeptical movement. Pyrrho had visited India, and he may possibly have come into contact with the Buddhist way of thinking, but there is no definite verification for this conjecture. We can find several similarities: like Buddhism, the Skeptical philosophy was antimetaphysical, regarding cosmological problems as insignificant and believing in emancipation from external things. But Skepticism was less nihilistic than Indian Buddhism. Its main foundations were scientific, not religious.

Above all, we must not neglect the impact of medicine upon Skeptical philosophy. Greek medicine was divided into two camps. One was theoretical, based on philosophic abstractions; the other was severely empirical and made a detailed investigation of diseases. The empirical school of medicine abhorred any type of vagueness. It stressed the fact that diseases can be cured only through analytical study of anatomy and physiology. In this respect it was far superior to medieval medicine, which was frequently subordinated to theological beliefs.

To read the writings which have been ascribed to Hippocrates, the father of Greek medicine, is to receive the impression of an experimental mind. He used the inductive method and thought all conclusions not based on actual observation likely to be fallacious. His knowledge of the bones and muscles was up-to-date, although his theories regarding the nervous system were primitive. He showed the limitations of Greek science by his assertion that the body is made up of four elements—earth, water, fire, and air—and that it consists of four types of fluids—blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. These theories strike the modern student of medicine as quite naive and unscientific, but Hippocrates, we must remember, had a naturalistic concept of health and appreciated the effect of climatic factors upon the human body. Furthermore, his ideals regarding the medical profession as contained in the Hippocratic Oath are still being followed in our own time.

The progress of medicine was especially promoted in Alexandria. There Herophilus distinguished himself by researches in the structure of the eye and the function of the brain. Erasistratus made valuable discoveries regarding the functions of veins and arteries. It was in Alexandria that notable advances were made in surgery and theoretical medical research, which extended not only to human beings but also to animals.

All these trends had a marked influence upon the Skeptical philosophers. We note, for example, that Heraclides of Tarent was one of the teachers of Aenesidemus, who achieved exactness of observation under the impact of the broad experimental influence of his teacher. In short, the empirical school of medicine proved to be an intense stimulus to the Skeptical movement. It indicated that philosophy must be based on observation and experiments and that it cannot progress by the use of generalizations. The empirical school of medicine also demonstrated that advancement in philosophy does not depend upon a

complete unification of all theories but is best achieved through a better understanding of specific facts and specific concepts.

THE ENEMIES OF SKEPTICISM

To appreciate the immense contributions of Skepticism, we must understand the objects of its attacks. Skepticism was especially opposed to the Stoic philosophy. Almost in every way the Skeptics denied the validity of the Stoic arguments. They certainly did not believe in pantheism, nor did they regard virtue as an end in itself. Nor did they accept the Stoic explanation of divination and the existence of the gods. Most of the time the Skeptics looked down on the Stoic sages, whom they regarded as extremely credulous and rather naive in their outlook upon the universe.

The Skeptics not merely attacked the Stoics but included in their assaults the other schools of philosophy, especially the Platonists and Aristotelians. They tried to demolish the elaborate cosmological systems of both Plato and Aristotle by showing that they were based on a false assumption regarding human knowledge. According to the Skeptics, man cannot achieve an understanding of first principles, and reason cannot present us with a superior reality. In short, like Voltaire, the Skeptics claimed that metaphysics is essentially a waste of time and only leads to confusion.

It must be remembered that they were ardent students of history. Many of them traveled a great deal; everywhere they observed how customs and institutions differ. What was held in honor by one nation was ridiculed by another. The taboos of one city were cheerfully accepted by another. No wonder the Skeptics did not believe in absolute standards and stressed suspension of judgment!

In reading the Skeptical treatises, especially Sextus Empiricus, we find a rather sophisticated spirit which reminds us somewhat of 20th-century philosophy. The Skeptics were attempting to fight against the biases of the popular mind. They were trying to eradicate the false conceptions taught by religion. In this attempt they championed intellectual freedom, which, to them, was the only hope for humanity.

It is important to realize that the Skeptics did not view philosophy as an absolute science. The philosopher, to them, had no superior insight and no special revelations of reality. Rather, he was a critic of contemporary institutions and of prevalent ideas, and he demonstrated how man's mind can be purified from obsolete traditions. If Skepticism had triumphed, it would have led to a reconstruction of philosophy; but it was defeated, and thus the spirit of criticism was long quiescent in the history of civilization.

PYRRHO

Pyrrho is generally regarded as the founder of the Skeptical tradition. He was born at Elis c. 360 B.C. and is said to have lived to a very ripe old age. In his youth he was a remarkable student, especially of literature and science, and very early in his development he took up the study of philosophy. His teachers introduced him to the Megaric and Democritean systems.

Adventure entered Pyrrho's life when he accompanied Alexander the Great on his expedition to India. After the death of Alexander he went back to Elis, where he spent the remaining years of his life. He earned his living as a teacher and, like Socrates, believed in a very informal method of instruction. His teaching was not restricted to those who were especially interested in philosophy but was extended to the common people. According to his friends, he possessed amazing self-control and serenity. Toward physical pain he showed no fear. It is said that when he underwent an operation he expressed no emotion

whatsoever.

Pyrrho was held in high esteem by his contemporaries, who regarded him as a great teacher and were proud of him as lending intellectual luster to Elis. Despite his Skepticism, he adhered to established laws since he had no desire to become a revolutionary. Ironically enough, his life was far more fortunate than that of Socrates, although he was intellectually more subversive than the latter.

The philosophy of Pyrrho is based on the concept that we can know only phenomena. Reason, then, cannot give us a knowledge of first principles. We are presented with certain experiences which we interpret according to certain philosophical tenets. Throughout his life, Pyrrho noted how philosophers differ among themselves and how theoretical assertions cannot be considered absolute. He was skeptical regarding any definite method of achieving truth. While some believe in the senses, he thought it was only too well established that the senses are fallible. Those who feel confident in reason, likewise, have little ground for certainty, for reason, too, presents us merely with relative standards and depends upon our own state of enlightenment and upon the culture in which we live.

What then is the best attitude? To Pyrrho, it was an open mind and a tentative evaluation of all the facts of our existence. To some extent he was less absolute in his doubts than the later Skeptics. Hence, he did not assert categorically that there is no truth. He did not believe that the search for definite knowledge should be abandoned. On the positive side, he thought the most adequate method leads to the suspension of judgment. In other words, any type of dogmatism must be shunned.

What, then, are the basic elements in the Skeptical attitude? Pyrrho believed, first of all, in doubt. It is better for the philosopher, he taught, to deny things than to affirm them categorically. When we are confronted by any intellectual problem, we must consider it carefully and see all its aspects, without hastening to a spontaneous conclusion. We are to keep our minds open all the time and not make categorical assertions.

In his ethical philosophy, Pyrrho exhibited the same spirit as in his view of epistemology and metaphysics. Like the Sophists, he believed ethical standards to be entirely relative. We cannot find, accordingly, universal certainty in ethics. What is condemned by one society may be accepted by another. Yet ethical distinctions are not to be neglected. The wise man will pay due regard to them and adhere to custom. Like Hume in the 18th century, Pyrrho was a conservative when it came to following established institutions.

It is significant to note that the ethical ideal of Pyrrho was not entirely negative, for he believed that the right kind of intellectual and emotional adjustment leads to freedom and to true serenity. If our minds do not adhere to any set standards, Pyrrho asserted, we are emancipated from prejudice and achieve a genuine freedom which leads to an autonomy of the soul.

TIMON

Most of our information about Pyrrho comes from the testimony of Timon, one of his students. Timon started his career as a dancer in the theater but soon tired of dancing and devoted himself to philosophy. At first he was interested in the Aegaric system, but when convinced of its inadequacy he became an adherent to the philosophy of Pyrrho. He was an indefatigable traveler. We find him in Macedonia, in Elis, and in Athens. He was fond of the pleasures of life and, unlike Pyrrho, had an Epicurean strain in his character.

Timon stated that there is no absolute truth. He attacked the convictions of the conventional philosophers and satirized their views in a treatise called *Silli*. The book takes us to Hades, where an argument between the various schools of philosophy takes place. All sides are shown to be inadequate and are ridiculed in the most eloquent terms.

Only two philosophers are exempt—Pyrrho and Xenophanes. In this work Timon showed how the Pyrrhonic method could be used in clearing up the disputes of philosophy and in achieving intellectual clarity.

ARCESILAUS

Like Timon, Arcesilaus had a wide intellectual background. He not only was interested in science and in the arts but was also adept in logic. He studied under Theophrastus, who was a superior teacher and gave him the foundation for his scientific knowledge. Later he joined the Academy and became one of the noted teachers of his time. He was in contact with many of the princes and kings and was sent on diplomatic missions by the Athenians. Immensely popular, he was an impressive scholar and reintroduced the Socratic method of argument, thus making philosophy more exciting. Abandoning formal lectures when he became head of the Academy, he taught his students how to be independent in their assertions and how to defend their viewpoints. It was his aim to point out the contradictions of the various intellectual systems and to show that probability, not certainty, must be our guide.

The main attack of Arcesilaus was directed against the Stoics, who had claimed that one can achieve universal knowledge based on irresistible impressions. The Stoics, moreover, had made a sharp distinction between the wise man, who knows the truth, and the masses, who live merely by opinion. These views were sharply contradicted by Arcesilaus. Do we have a definite standard of knowledge? Arcesilaus answered in the negative. All knowledge, he thought, rests on opinion. There is no definite distinction between falsehood and truth. For example, the impression of our dreams is just as irresistible as the perceptions of our waking existence. The opinion of the fool is just as definite as the opinion of the wise man. Knowledge of a thing, in short, does not present us with immediate certainty; it only gives us probable and relative standards which have to be verified by experience.

The result of this discussion is the acceptance of relativity. We must suspend our judgment, Arcesilaus emphasized, when it comes to intellectual matters, for we cannot make any definite assertions. As for the Stoic concept of epistemology, it was based on an uncritical acceptance of certainty, he felt, and it was his task to destroy the foundations of the Stoic system.

In his ethical ideals Arcesilaus taught that knowledge of moral laws is secondary. What matters most is action. According to his belief, man experiences and feels certain things before he thinks about them. To live a meaningful life we do not have to be philosophers; rather, we should be practical.

Unlike the Stoics, he did not regard virtue as an end in itself. We know that he believed in the pleasures of life and occasionally was not above showing off his learning. Yet he was invariably generous with his material goods and always ready to help a friend in need. In Arcesilaus, thus, we find a delightful mixture of hedonism and skepticism.

CARNEADES

Arcesilaus was surpassed by Carneades, who likewise turned against Stoic philosophy. He was born c. 213 B.C. and died in 129. He was adept in the systems of philosophy which existed in his time, especially in Stoicism, and his teaching was both scholarly and full of vitality. He was especially skilled in argumentation and often confused his students about his real opinions because he was able to present many sides of an argument.

When he went to Rome as one of the elected Greek ambassadors, in 155 B.C., he made

a deep impression on the Roman people. The reason for the trip was the Athenian pillaging of an allied city, for which the Athenians were required to pay a large indemnity. They desired a reduction; hence they sent a diplomatic mission to Rome.

Carneades spoke before distinguished audiences in Rome. Among his listeners were Cato, the indefatigable enemy of Greek culture, and other outstanding leaders.

Carneades one day spoke in defense of justice and showed that the Roman Empire was based on this ideal. The following day he took the contrary position and indicated that Rome had expanded through power politics and a disregard for the laws of justice. He proved that the Romans had violated treaties, destroyed their rivals, and were intent upon the elimination of Carthage because of this lust for power. Certainly Rome was not motivated by idealistic concepts, he pointed out, but had become master of the world through shrewd manipulation of other nations. He indicated that in international politics, as in other social relations, there can be no absolute standards. The action of the Athenians, he therefore concluded, was not to be condemned, for they had only imitated the principles of the Romans.

We can imagine the shock to the conservative Romans, especially Cato. Here was a teacher of youth who openly declared that moral standards are not to be followed. It is not surprising to learn that Cato determined to prevent the growth of Greek philosophy in Rome. But he could not stem the tide, and ultimately the spirit of Carneades triumphed.

In his theory of knowledge Carneades, like his predecessors, held that no definite criterion for truth is possible. Reason, he showed, cannot present us with absolute standards, for it is not based on immediate certainty; its proofs always rest on relative standards. The system of dialectic is full of weaknesses; it ends in a vicious circle. Dialectic, being concerned with the formal relations of propositions, cannot give us an understanding of the content of experience.

Nor does truth, Carneades reminds us, rest upon an intuitive basis. If this were so, there would be an absolute standard of knowledge; but the history of philosophical and scientific opinions demonstrates that no concept is held universally and acknowledged by all. Carneades pointed to the incessant intellectual warfare. Philosophers can never agree among themselves; they are always at odds. There is no reason, according to him, to suppose that complete certainty can be achieved in philosophical arguments. We adhere to various schools and opinions because of personal biases, not because of our love for truth.

This is not all. What we think, what we believe, what we accept, depends on our emotional condition. Intellectual verities thus do not exist in a vacuum but depend upon our previous adjustment and our previous outlook on life. Furthermore, Carneades felt, the senses present us with a constant flux. What appears to us as true at one time may be false at another. We see an object, then we attribute various qualities to it, and we jump to a conclusion as to its nature. It is much better, he believed, to suspend our judgment in regard to it. If we do so, both science and philosophy may advance at a more secure rate.

What impresses us especially in the philosophy of Carneades is his scientific outlook. He advocated that probability be our guide. There are three stages in this process of probability. We start first with a simple probability which is applied to an isolated idea. This is a low degree of probability, for we are not aided by a knowledge of other concepts and we cannot verify our beliefs.

There is a higher state of probability, which is undisputed. Now we can unite an idea with other concepts without being contradicted. We can take a certain action on the basis of previous knowledge and previous experience.

The highest type of probability, however, is one which can be both tested and verified. Intellectually, we can develop a system of ideas which have worked in the past and been proved valid. It is this type of probability which should guide our knowledge and our

intellectual endeavors.

To make the meaning of Carneades concrete, let us imagine we are trying to select a good teacher. We have a candidate who appears to have fine traits. This represents the first degree of probability. Now we look up his past record, which indicates high intellectual achievement. This is undisputed probability. Finally we observe him in action, and we make a complete investigation of his relations with his colleagues, students, and parents. We find him to be excellent. Thus we have achieved the highest stage of probability.

Just as in his theory of knowledge, so we find a scientific spirit in the ethics of Carneades. His speech before the Roman senate indicated that he did not believe in absolute moral standards. The Stoics, then, were wrong when they stressed the universality of ethics. Moral codes merely hide human selfishness. In the case of individuals, moral laws may hold true; but when it comes to nations, they are usually violated.

Like Hobbes in the 17th century, Carneades upheld self-interest. Away, then, with abstract principles of right and justice! Away with superficial idealism!

Like the Sophists, Carneades believed we must study ethics in a realistic sense without imposing our ideals on the universe. The standard is nature, he declared, implying that external goods are not to be shunned and asceticism is not the *summum bonum* (highest good). The wise man will not disregard the experience of the senses. He will be careful of his health and try to live in comfort. In short, the Stoic concept of apathy was not welcomed by Carneades.

In turning to Carneades' theory of religion, we find that he undermined the basis of Stoic theology.

"We will begin with the question of the First Principles of the Universe, and since most theories agree in holding that there are causes of two kinds, material causes and active causes, we will begin by discussing the active causes. These causes are said to count for more than the material ones. Now the majority of philosophers have asserted that the supreme active cause is God. We will first, therefore, see how the matter stands with God. But there is one preliminary statement which we must make. We Skeptics follow in practice the way of the world, but without holding any opinion about it. We speak of the gods as existing and offer worship to the gods and say that they exercise providence, but in saying this we express no belief, and avoid the rashness of the dogmatists" (Sextus Empiricus, *Hypotyp.* iii).

According to Carneades, we cannot understand the essence of God: "For if they say that God controls everything, they make him the author of evil things; if, on the other hand, they say that he controls some things only, or that he controls nothing, they are compelled to make God either grudging or impotent, and to do that is quite obviously an impiety" (ibid).

CLITOMACHUS

Our knowledge of Carneades comes mainly through Clitomachus, his disciple, who was born in Carthage. For a short period Clitomachus conducted his own school in Athens, but later he returned to the Academy and became its head after the death of Crates. Unlike Carneades, he was more of a commentator and most of the time repeated the theories of his predecessors. Like Carneades, he believed that the best intellectual attitude is one which leads to the suspension of judgment and that any type of intellectual absolutism must be avoided. The arguments of the various schools of philosophy, he showed, rest upon intellectual vanity, and no definite certainty can be found.

After Clitomachus, the Academy reverted to dogmatism. This reversion was apparent to some extent under Philo of Larissa, who modified the Skepticism of Carneades and affirmed the power of reason. He wanted to go back to original Platonism. This return was

fully accomplished under Antiochus, the student of Philo, who at first was a Skeptic but later turned to dogmatism. He lectured in Rome and Alexandria, as well as at the Academy.

Antiochus was primarily interested in ethics. He attacked absolute Skepticism, maintaining that any standard of probability is based on some kind of certainty. To adopt a coherent philosophy, he maintained, we need conviction. In these arguments he foreshadowed the viewpoints of modern idealists, especially Josiah Royce. The modern idealist, like Antiochus, believes that relative truth only points to absolute truth and that all fragmentary parts of experience are connected.

AENESIDEMUS AND THE PROBLEM OF CAUSALITY

Probably the most significant representative of Skepticism was Aenesidemus. With him the scene shifted to Alexandria, which then became the center of the movement. We know very little about his life. Authorities differ as to his exact dates, but we can be quite certain that he lived in the 1st century B.C.

Among his works were *Against wisdom*; *Investigation*; *Pyrrhonic sketches*; *The first introduction to principles*; and eight books of *Pyrrhonic discourses*. None of the books has survived except *Pyrrhonic discourses*, which we find quoted in a book by Sextus Empiricus.

Aenesidemus summarized the Skeptical philosophy in his ten tropes, which indicate that the only valid intellectual attitude is one which leads to a suspension of judgment. The first argument, or trope, shows that different impressions are produced according to differences in animals. "This we infer both from the differences in their origins and from the variety of their bodily structures. Thus, as to origin, some animals are produced without sexual union, others by coition. And of those produced without coition, some come from fire, like the animalcules which appear in furnaces; others from putrid water, like gnats; others from wine when it turns sour, like ants; others from earth, like grasshoppers; others from marsh, like frogs; others from mud, like worms; others from asses, like beetles; others from greens, like caterpillars; others from fruits, like the gall-insects in wild figs; others from rotting animals, as bees from bulls and wasps from horses. Of the animals generated by coition, some—in fact the majority—come from homogeneous parents, others from heterogeneous parents, as do mules. Again, of animals in general, some are born alive, like men; others are born as eggs, like birds; and yet others as lumps of flesh, like bears. It is natural then, that these dissimilar and variant modes of birth should produce much contrariety of sense-affection, and that this is a source of its divergent, discordant, and conflicting character" (Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Bk. i).

The variety of impressions depends on the various sense organs. "Thus, in respect of touch, how could one maintain that creatures covered with shells, with flesh, with prickles, with feathers, with scales, are all similarly affected? And as for the sense of hearing, how could we say that its perceptions are alike in animals with a very narrow auditory passage and those with a very wide one, or in animals with hairy ears and those with smooth ears? For, as regards this sense, even we ourselves find our hearing affected in one way when we have our ears plugged and in another way when we use them just as they are....So too with the objects of taste; for some animals have rough and dry tongues, others extremely moist tongues. We ourselves, too, when our tongues are very dry, in cases of fever, think the food proffered us to be earthy and ill-flavored or bitter—an affection due to the variation in the predominating juices which we are said to contain. Since, then, animals also have organs of taste which differ and which have different juices in excess, in respect of taste also they will receive different impressions of the real objects" (ibid).

The second argument is based on the differences in men. "For even if we grant for the sake of argument that men are more worthy than irrational animals, we shall find that

even our own differences of themselves lead to suspense. For man, you know, is said to be compounded of two things, soul and body, and in both these we differ one from another.

“Thus, as regards the body, we differ in our figures, and ‘idiosyncrasies’ or constitutional peculiarities” (ibid).

The third argument appeals to the differences in sensation. “Thus to the eye paintings seem to have recesses and projections, but not so to the touch. Honey, too, seems to some pleasant to the tongue but unpleasant to the eyes; so that it is impossible to say whether it is absolutely pleasant or unpleasant. The same is true of sweet oil, for it pleases the sense of smell but displeases the taste....Rain water, too, is beneficial to the eyes but roughens the windpipe and the lungs; as also does olive oil, though it mollifies the epidermis. The cramp-fish, also, when applied to the extremities produces cramp, but it can be applied to the rest of the body without hurt. Consequently, we are unable to say what is the real nature of each of these things, although it is possible to say what each thing at the moment appears to be” (ibid).

Aenesidemus taught that nature does not create things according to our sense experience. The concept of nature itself is contradictory. “For he who decides the question as to the existence of Nature will be discredited by them if he is an ordinary person, while if he is a philosopher he will be a party to the controversy and therefore himself subject to judgment and not a judge. If, however, it is possible that only those qualities which we seem to perceive subsist in the apple, or that a greater number subsist, or, again, that not even the qualities which affect us subsist, then it will be non-evident to us what the nature of the apple really is. And the same argument applies to all other objects of sense. But if the senses do not apprehend external objects, neither can the mind apprehend them; hence, because of this argument also, we shall be driven, it seems, to suspend judgment regarding the external underlying objects” (ibid).

The fourth argument depends on circumstances. “And this Mode, we say, deals with states that are natural or unnatural, with waking or sleeping, with conditions due to age, motion or rest, hatred or love, emptiness or fullness, drunkenness or soberness, predispositions, confidence or fear, grief or joy. Thus according as the mental state is natural or unnatural, objects produce dissimilar impressions, as when men in a frenzy or in a state of ecstasy believe they hear daemons’ voices, while we do not....Also, the same water which feels very hot when poured on inflamed spots seems lukewarm to us. And the same coat which seems of a bright yellow color to men with blood-shot eyes does not appear so to me. And the same honey seems to me sweet, but bitter to men with jaundice” (ibid).

The fifth argument is founded on difference in position, distance, and place. “For owing to each of these the same objects appear different; for example, the same porch when viewed from one of its corners appears curtailed, but viewed from the middle symmetrical on all sides; and the same ship seems at a distance to be small and stationary, but from close at hand large and in motion; and the same tower from a distance appears round but from a near point quadrangular.

“These effects are due to distances; among effects due to locations are the following: the light of a lamp appears dim in the sun but bright in the dark; and the same oar bent when in the water but straight when out of the water . . . and sound seems to differ in quality according as it is produced in a pipe, or in a flute, or simply in the air” (ibid)

Objects thus are viewed not as they are in themselves, but according to their position and distance. Since, then, all apparent objects are viewed in a certain place, and from a certain distance, or in a certain position, and each of these conditions produces a great divergency in the sense-impressions, as we mentioned above, we shall be compelled by this Mode also to end up in suspension of judgment. For in fact, anyone who purposes to give the preference to any of these impressions will be attempting the impossible. For if he

shall deliver his judgment simply and without proof, he will be discredited; and should he, on the other hand, desire to adduce proof, he will confute himself if he says that the proof is false, while if he asserts that the proof is true he will be asked for a proof of its truth, and again for a proof of this latter proof, since it also must be true, and so on ad infinitum. But to produce proofs to infinity is impossible; so that neither by the use of proofs will he be able to prefer one sense-impression to another. If, then, one cannot hope to pass judgment on the afore-mentioned impressions either with or without proof, the conclusion we are driven to is suspension; for while we can, no doubt, state the nature which each object appears to possess as viewed in a certain position or at a certain distance or in a certain place, what its real nature is we are, for the foregoing reasons, unable to declare” (ibid).

The sixth argument is based on the fact that all objects come together and are mixed. “That none of the external objects affects our senses by itself but always in conjunction with something else, and that, in consequence, it assumes a different appearance, is, I imagine, quite obvious. Thus, our own complexion is of one hue in warm air, of another in cold, and we should not be able to say what our complexion really is, but only what it looks like in conjunction with each of these conditions. And the same sound appears of one sort in conjunction with rare air and of another sort with dense air; and odors are more pungent in a hot bathroom or in the sun than in chilly air; and a body is light when immersed in water but heavy when surrounded by air.

“But to pass on from the subject of external admixture—our eyes contain within themselves both membranes and liquids. Since, then, the objects of vision are not perceived apart from these, they will not be apprehended with exactness; for what we perceive is the resultant mixture, and because of this the sufferers from jaundice see everything yellow, and those with blood-shot eyes reddish like blood” (ibid).

Aenesidemus demonstrated how the mind adds to this mixture and thus leads to confusion. “Nor yet does the mind apprehend it, since, in the first place, its guides, which are the senses, go wrong; and probably, too, the mind itself adds a certain admixture of its own to the messages conveyed by the senses; for we observe that there are certain humors present in each of the regions which the Dogmatists regard as the seat of the “Ruling Principle”—whether it be the brain or the heart, or in whatever part of the creature one chooses to locate it. Thus, according to this Mode also we see that, owing to our inability to make any statement about the real nature of external objects, we are compelled to suspend judgment” (ibid).

The seventh argument is based on the quantity and constitution of objects. “And chips of the marble of Taenarum seem white when planed, but in combination with the whole block they appear yellow. And pebbles when scattered apart appear rough, but when combined in a heap they produce the sensation of softness....And wine strengthens us when drunk in moderate quantity, but when too much is taken it paralyzes the body. So likewise food exhibits different effects according to the quantity consumed; for instance, it frequently upsets the body with indigestion and attacks of purging because of the large quantity taken” (ibid).

To substantiate his argument, Aenesidemus appealed to medicine. “As a general rule, it seems that wholesome things become harmful when used in immoderate quantities, and things that seem hurtful when taken to excess cause no harm when in minute quantities. What we observe in regard to the effects of medicines is the best evidence in support of our statement; for there the exact blending of the simple drugs makes the compound wholesome, but when the slightest oversight is made in the measuring, as sometimes happens, the compound is not only unwholesome but frequently even most harmful and deleterious. Thus the argument from quantities and compositions causes confusion as to the real nature of the external substances. Probably, therefore, 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” (ibid).

The eighth argument is based on relativity, which has a twofold meaning. “And this statement is twofold, implying, firstly, relation to the thing which judges (for the external object which is judged appears in relation to that thing), and, in a second sense, relation to the accompanying percepts, for instance the right side in relation to the left. Indeed, we have already argued that all things are relative—for example, with respect to the thing which judges, it is in relation to some one particular animal or man or sense that each object appears, and in relation to such and such a circumstance; and with respect to the concomitant percepts, each object appears in relation to some one particular admixture or mode or combination or quantity or position” (ibid).

Aenesidemus considered all things to be relative. “moreover, some existent things are similar, others dissimilar, and some equal, others unequal; and these are relative; therefore all things are relative. And even he who asserts that not all things are relative confirms the relativity of all things since by his arguments against us he shows that the very statement ‘not all things are relative’ is relative to ourselves, and not universal.

“When, however, we have thus established that all things are relative, we are plainly left with the conclusion that we shall not be able to state what is the nature of each of the objects in its own real purity, but only what nature it appears to possess in its relative character. Hence it follows that we must suspend judgment concerning the real nature of the objects” (ibid).

The ninth argument is founded on the constancy or rarity of an occurrence. “The sun is, of course, much more amazing than a comet; yet because we see the sun constantly but the comet rarely we are so amazed by the comet that we even regard it as a divine portent, while the sun causes no amazement at all. If, however, we were to conceive of the sun as appearing but rarely and setting rarely, and illuminating everything all at once and throwing everything into shadow suddenly, then we should experience much amazement at the sight. An earthquake also does not cause the same alarm in those who experience it for the first time and those who have grown accustomed to such things. How much amazement, also, does the sea excite in the man who sees it for the first time! And indeed the beauty of a human body thrills us more at the first sudden view than when it becomes a customary spectacle. Rare things too we count as precious, but not what is familiar to us and easily got” (ibid).

The tenth argument relates to morals and laws. All things are determined by custom. “For example, we oppose habit to habit in this way: some of the Ethiopians tattoo their children, but we do not; and while the Persians think it seemly to wear a brightly dyed dress reaching to the feet, we think it unseemly....And law we oppose to law in this way: among the Romans the man who renounces his father’s property does not pay his father’s debts, but among the Rhodians he always pays them; and among the Scythian Tauri it was a law that strangers should be sacrificed to Artemis, but with us it is forbidden to slay a human being at the altar. And we oppose rule of conduct to rule of conduct, as when we oppose the rule of Diogenes to that of Aristippus or that of the Laconians to that of the Italians....And we oppose dogmatic conceptions to one another when we say that some declare that there is one element only, others an infinite number; some that the soul is mortal, others that it is immortal; and some that human affairs are controlled by divine Providence, others without Providence” (ibid).

Even more significant than Aenesidemus’ general statement of Skepticism is his attitude regarding causality. His arguments are summarized in eight modes.

“Of these the First, he says, is that which shows that, since aetiology as a whole deals with the non-apparent, it is unconfirmed by any agreed evidence derived from appearances.

The Second Mode shows how often, when there is ample scope for ascribing the object of investigation to a variety of causes, some of them account for it in one way only. The Third shows how to orderly events they assign causes which exhibit no order. The Fourth shows how, when they have grasped the way in which appearances occur, they assume that they have also apprehended how non-apparent things occur, whereas, though the non-apparent may possibly be realized in a similar way to the appearances, possibly they may not be realized in a similar way but in a peculiar way of their own. In the Fifth Mode it is shown how practically all these theorists assign causes according to their own particular hypotheses about the elements, and not according to any commonly agreed methods. In the Sixth it is shown how they frequently admit only such facts as can be explained by their own theories, and dismiss facts which conflict therewith though possessing equal probability. The Seventh shows how they often assign causes which conflict not only with appearances but also with their own hypotheses. The Eighth shows that often, when there is equal doubt about things seemingly apparent and things under investigation, they base their doctrine about things equally doubtful upon things equally doubtful” (ibid).

Notice how in his arguments Aenesidemus attacked the dogmatic assumptions. He explained that hypotheses are chosen in an arbitrary way and that philosophers view the world according to their own prejudices. Throughout his discussion of causation Aenesidemus revealed his scientific learning. He made it clear that we can not argue about the immaterial world. Those who define the invisible realm are wasting their time. We do not know what it is like, for our knowledge rests on analogy, which necessarily is faulty.

It must be noted that Aenesidemus also developed a metaphysical system of his own in which, influenced by Heraclitus, he stated that air is the world substance. Commentators do not agree as to the significance of this metaphysical system, and some believe it merely represents an earlier stage of his development.

Generally, Aenesidemus was antimetaphysical. He did not believe in any ultimate principles and did not accept any absolute categories. To him, neither science, religion, nor morality revealed any final truth. Knowledge, he felt, must end in tentative evaluations. No large-scale assertions can be made; in everything we must be guided by relativity.

AGRIPPA

The Skeptical system of Aenesidemus was elaborated by Agrippa, who lived in the 1st century A.D. He proposed five tropes against the dogmatic philosophers. The first relates to the conflict of opinions; the second is based on the fact that every proof requires another proof; the third is founded on the uncertain and relative nature of sensation; the fourth states that proof should not rest on unproved axioms; and the fifth, that reasoning inevitably is involved in a circle.

In these arguments Agrippa restated the contentions of his predecessors and also attacked the foundations of logical knowledge. The result is that he denied any kind of intellectual certainty. Let us abandon, then, any type of metaphysical speculation! Let us give up all metaphysical dogmatism! Instead, Agrippa taught, let us rely on the suspension of judgment, which alone will lead to a successful life.

MENODOTUS

The scientific aspect of Skepticism was especially evident in the work of Menodotus (70-150 A.D.). He was very bitter in his attack on the Stoics. He also objected to the Skepticism of the Academy and its theory of probability. He held that it is impossible for one concept

to be more probable than another.

SEXTUS EMPIRICUS

The life of Sextus Empiricus is surrounded by obscurity. We have three of his volumes from *The Pyrrhonic hypotyposes*, and six books, *Against the schoolmasters*, which contain attacks against the teachers of grammar, orators, geometricians, arithmeticians, astrologers, and musicians. The third work is *Against the dogmatic philosophers* (5 books), which consists of his objections to the logicians, the natural philosophers, teachers of ethics, and the system of morals propounded by the ethical thinkers. *Against the schoolmasters* and *Against the dogmatic philosophers* are usually united in eleven books under the title *Against the mathematicians*.

Sextus Empiricus is best known as the historian of Skepticism. He showed how the categories of science, such as causality, space, and number, contradict one another. Mathematics, then, is not absolute, but purely relative. So, too, is logic. In other words, no type of universality can be obtained.

All this should not deter us in our scientific quest, said Sextus Empiricus, for science can advance best when it is based on specific factors and when it uses the method of exact observation and analytical experimentation.

In his ethical theory, Sextus Empiricus followed the earlier Sceptics. All standards are relative and full of contradiction, he declared; and he indicated how philosophers have differed in their view of the final Good for man.

What then is the best attitude? How should we act in society? Sextus Empiricus urged conservatism and advocated following the past. In adjusting ourselves to the existing institutions we can best develop peace of mind and thus pursue our scientific interests.

LUCIAN

The influence of Skepticism extended to the field of literature as well as to science, especially in the work of Lucian, who lived about 120-200 A.D. He was a teacher of rhetoric and a prolific traveler. He visited, among other cities, Antioch, Rome, and later Athens. In his writings he used the method of satire and constantly exposed the folly of mankind.

Most interesting from the standpoint of philosophy is Lucian's *Zeus tragoedus*. It deals with a debate between Timocles, a Stoic thinker, and Damis, an Epicurean. The debate is being watched by the gods. Zeus is especially concerned and asks Hermes, the divine messenger, if the debate has been going on for a long time.

“Hermes: Not yet; they were still skirmishing—slinging invective at long range.

Zeus: Then we have only, Gods, to look over and listen. Let the Hours unbar, draw back the clouds, and open the doors of Heaven. Upon my word, what a vast gathering! And I do not quite like the looks of Timocles; he is trembling; he has lost his head; he will spoil everything; it is perfectly plain, he will not be able to stand up to Damis. Well, there is one thing left us: we can pray for him. Inwardly, silently, lest Damis hear.

Timocles: What, you miscreant, no Gods? no Providence?

Damis: No, no; you answer my question first; what makes you believe in them?

Timocles: None of that, now; the *onus probandi* is with you, scoundrel.

Damis: None of that now; it is with you.

(Zeus: At this game ours is much the better man—louder-voiced, rougher-tempered. Good, Timocles; stick to invective; that is your strong point; once get off

that, he will hook and hold you up like a fish.)

Timocles: I solemnly swear I will not answer first.

Damis: Well, put }our question then; so much you score by your oath. But no abuse, please.

Timocles: Done. Tell me then, and be damned to you, do you deny the Gods exercise providence?

Damis: I do.”

Throughout the dialogue Damis has the stronger argument. Finally Timocles appeals to syllogism.

“Timocles: See whether this is a sound syllogism; can you upset it? If there are altars, there are Gods: there are altars; therefore there are Gods. Now then.

Damis: Ha, ha, ha! I will answer as soon as I can get done with laughing.

Timocles: Will you never stop? At least tell me what the joke is.

Damis: Why, you don’t see that your anchor (sheet-anchor too) hangs by a mere thread. You depend on connection between the existence of Gods and the existence of altars, and fancy yourself safe at anchor! As you admit that this was your sheet-anchor, there is nothing further to detain us.

Timocles: You retire; you confess yourself beaten then?

Damis: Yes; we have seen you take sanctuary at the altars under persecution. At those altars I am ready (the sheet-anchor be my witness) to swear peace and cease from strife.

Timocles: You are playing with me, are you, you vile body-snatcher, you loathsome, well-whipped scum! As if we didn’t know who your father was, how your mother was a harlot! You strangled your own brother, you live in fornication, you debauch the young, you unabashed lecher! Don’t be in such a hurry; here is something for you to take with you; this broken pot will serve me to cut your foul throat.”

The gods are worried. Zeus asks what action should be taken. Hermes consoles him.

“Zeus: Damis makes off with a laugh, and the other after him, calling him names, mad at his insolence. He will get him on the head with that pottery, I know. And now, what are we to do?

Hermes: ... It is no such terrible disaster if a few people go away infected. There are plenty who take the other view—a majority of Greeks, the body and dregs of the people, and the barbarians to a man.”

THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF SKEPTICISM

To sum up the contributions of Skepticism: It gave a scientific foundation to ancient philosophy. It pointed out that both our sense knowledge and our reason are untrustworthy and that the best intellectual attitude is one of doubt and suspension of judgment.

In metaphysics Skepticism believed we cannot speak of a superior reality, for we cannot make any valid intellectual assertions about the immaterial realm. To some extent this view implies that all metaphysical discussions are sterile and that it is best to adopt a specific and experimental view of the universe.

In its attitude regarding science, Skepticism protested against abstraction. It thereby tried to separate philosophy and science. More than any other school of philosophy. Skepticism

believed in the verification of knowledge.

In the realm of ethics the Skeptics pointed to the relativity of all moral standards. They attacked the Stoic doctrine that virtue is all-important. As we have noted, their method of doubt did not lead to revolutionary efforts or to any attempts to reform mankind.

In their method of investigation, the Skeptics resurrected the Socratic approach. Knowledge, they showed, begins with a profession of ignorance, but the end process of knowledge likewise indicates our inability to know and understand first principles. Unlike the Stoics, the Skeptics did not accept irresistible impressions; to them the process of knowledge was entirely relative.

In short, all the categories of science, religion, and morality were subjected to a searching criticism by Skepticism, which pointed to the inevitable limitations of the human mind. The universe of the Skeptics was purely mechanical; it contained no first cause, no divine soul, and no Providence.

As a consistent philosophical movement. Skepticism did not re-emerge until the Renaissance. Then Montaigne and Pomponazzi resurrected the doctrines of doubt and subjected the existing forms of knowledge to a thoroughgoing criticism. Thenceforth, doubt has reigned supreme in modern thinking, thereby vindicating the wisdom of the ancient Skeptics.

QUESTIONS & TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What movements influenced the rise of Skepticism?
2. Describe the philosophical achievement of Carneades.
3. How did Pyrrho aid the progress of Skepticism?
4. Why were the Skeptics opposed to Stoic philosophy?
5. What was the Skeptic viewpoint of causality?
6. What were the ethical conclusions of the Skeptics? How do their moral principles compare with those of Socrates?
7. Discuss the ten tropes. What is their significance?
8. Describe the contributions of Aenesidemus.
9. What were the weaknesses of Skepticism?

Frederick Mayer. *A History of Ancient and Medieval Philosophy*. New York: American Book Company, 1950.
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