



A Skeptical Approach to Happiness

Michael S. Russo

The skeptics were a group of philosophers who questioned whether it was possible to arrive at the truth. There are two main schools of skeptics in the ancient world. The Academics were a group of skeptics living around the time of Plato (3rd century BC) who took their starting point from Socrates' dictum, "All I can know is that I know nothing." They argued that since there is no way to distinguish between true perceptions and illusions, the best that human beings were capable of was probable true belief. The only thing, they claimed, that human beings could have certainty about was that they couldn't be certain of anything.

The other school of Skepticism was known as Pyrrhonian Skepticism (named after the founder of this school, Pyrrho of Elis who lived in Alexandria during the 1st century BC). The Pyrrhonians were even more extreme than their earlier counterparts, denying that human beings could have any certainty at all...even about the impossibility of certainty itself.

The Pyrrhonian Skepticism of Sextus Empiricus

During the 2nd century AD, a Greek physician by the name of Sextus Empiricus gave a famous description of Pyrrhoist doctrine in his work, *Outlines of Pyrrhoism*. The work was so influential in the 16th and 17th centuries, that it led to a revival of skeptic thought and played a large role in the development of modern philosophy.

At the beginning of this work, Sextus contrasts the philosophical approach of the Skeptics to that of traditional philosophers such as Aristotle or Epicurus, whom he dismisses as mere dogmatists (those who claim to have discovered the TRUTH). The Academics are also dogmatic, he suggests, because they too claim to have grasped the Truth—namely, that there is no truth. Unlike these other philosophers, the Skeptics are perpetual investigators (the term skeptic, in fact, comes from a Greek verb meaning "to carefully examine"), always doubting whether the truth can be apprehended, but necessarily open to the possibility, at least, that this might be the case (*Outlines* 1.1).

The philosophy of Pyrrhonian Skepticism as it is described by Sextus Empiricus can be broken down into four distinct stages:

Stage 1: The Method of Antithesis

The skeptic begins by opposing one set of propositions with another set of opposing propositions. For example: "There is a God who created the universe and the universe came into being purely by chance." Or: "All human beings possess a free will and human beings are completely determined by their genetic make-ups." The method of antithesis has a long tradition in Skeptic philosophy. The Academic philosopher Carneades, on a trip to Rome, was reported to have

argued forcefully for justice one day and argued equally forcefully against it the next day.

Stage 2: Equipollence

A good skeptic as we have just seen is one who is capable of using the method of antithesis to argue persuasively for opposing claims and propositions (arguing not-p for any thesis p that is put forth as being true). This ability, Sextus Empiricus believes, leads naturally to a state of equipollence: the skeptic finds that, after both sides of an issue have been thoroughly argued, there is as much to be said for one side of the issue as there is for the other (the truth of not-p seems to be as certain as the truth of p) and that one has no rational basis for choosing one side over the other.

The later Skeptics devised what came to be referred to as the Ten Modes of Skepticism. The aim of each of these modes is to create antitheses. The first mode, for example, stresses that the same objects do not produce the same sensations in different animals. We know that the sense organs of animals differ from species to species: bats and flies, for instance, probably perceive the world differently from one another and from human beings. Sextus goes on to write:

But if the same things appear different owing to the variety in animals, we shall, indeed be able to state our impressions of the real object, but as to its essential nature we shall suspend judgment. For we cannot ourselves judge between our own impressions and those of other animals, since we ourselves are involved in the dispute and are, therefore, rather in need of a judge than competent to pass judgment ourselves. Besides, we are unable, either with or without proof, to prefer our own impressions to those of the irrational animals. (1.14)

Based upon the fact that external objects appear differently to different creatures, the skeptic concludes that objects in the world may not be exactly as they appear to us. The end result: uncertainty.

Stage 3: Epoche

The ten modes, described by Sextus presumably would lead the critical person to a suspension of judgment or *epoche* (from a Greek word meaning to check, cease, suspend, stop or pause in some activity that otherwise or normally occurs). The skeptic, in other words, avoids affirming or denying the truth of any statements about the actual nature of things. We might be able to say what something *appears* or how it *seems* to be, but we cannot make any judgments about what actually is the case.

We have already seen in the text that Sextus is adamant about the language that skeptics should use when making philosophical pronouncements, precisely because he wishes them to be careful not to inadvertently make dogmatic pronouncements. A good skeptic will certainly never say something like “This is the case.” Instead he will use expressions that illustrate his uncertainty: “Perhaps/possibly/maybe this is the case (and perhaps/possibly/maybe it is not).”

Stage 4: Ataraxia

One would think that a skeptic could never be happy, since he is so filled with uncertainty at all

times. Actually Sextus maintains that it is not the skeptic who is unhappy, but the dogmatist. According to Sextus, the quest for certainty can only lead to doubt, which in turn leads us to be perturbed; and someone, who is perturbed, he believes, can never be happy. So the skeptic would maintain that in order to be happy, we must give up the quest for certainty.... We must, in other words, become skeptics. In Book 1, chapter 12 of *Outlines*, Sextus, describes happiness as nothing more than the tranquility of soul (*ataraxia*) that comes from suspending all judgment about the world and our place in it.

Skepticism and the Happy Life

The tradition of skepticism was one of the eudaimonistically oriented philosophies of the ancient world. Unlike the other main philosophical schools of antiquity, the skeptics were not at all concerned about theoretical questions of metaphysics or epistemology. The sole purpose of their philosophy was the attainment of inner peace (*ataraxia*) in every day life.

The question, however, is whether the methods of skepticism, if faithfully practiced, would lead to inner peace as the skeptic assumes. We have seen that, although Socrates adopted a kind of skeptical doubt when cross examining the men of Athens, he clearly believed that some degree of certainty was possible in the moral realm, and that this moral certainty would necessarily lead to virtuous behavior, and hence, happiness. Plato goes even further arguing that the Forms were knowable to those who purified their minds through philosophical practice.

The goal of all dogmatic philosophy is happiness, but this goal, according to the skeptic, can never be realized. Living according to absolutes about religious, metaphysical or moral matters can only lead to unhappiness when these so-called “truths” are called into question, as they inevitably will be in the course of life. Believing that something is either objectively good or bad also leads to unhappiness insofar as we become tormented when we lack the things we call “good” and are perpetually disturbed by the things we call “bad” or “evil.” Even when we possess what is “good,” we are still tormented by the prospect of their loss.

Instead, the skeptic calls us to give up this quest for truth entirely, and urges us rest comfortably in our own metaphysical and moral ignorance. When one course of action in life seems not to be optimal (for example, pursuing wealth as the key to happiness), we can gracefully shift to another option (adopting a simple life free from all luxury items). But we do so without the kind of guilt or unhappiness that the dogmatists inevitably face when he is forced to abandon his so-called “truths.”

Practicing suspension of judgment also leads necessarily to indifference to misfortune. Since the skeptic can never be certain that misfortunes (having your legs cut off in an accident or having a loved one die, for example) are actually bad things, he learns to accept all the adversities that life throws at him with calmness and composure. Having no opinion about whether things are good or bad means the skeptic can also be tranquil when things that appear good are taken away and prevents him from endlessly chasing after them to attain some illusionary happiness.

Sources

Sextus Empiricus. *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Translated by R.G. Bury. Harvard: Cambridge University Press, 1937.

For Further Reading

- Annas, Julia. *The Morality of Happiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993 [201-213].
- Anna, Julia and Barnes, Jonathan. *The Modes of Scepticism: Ancient Texts and Modern Interpretations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Ausland, H. "On the Moral Origin of the Pyrrhonian Philosophy." *Elenchos* 10 (1989): 359-434.
- Bailey, Alan. *Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonian Scepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Barnes, Jonathan. *The Toils of Skepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Bett, Richard. *Pyrrho, His Antecedents, and His Legacy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Bevan, Edwyn Robert. *Stoics and Sceptics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913.
- . *The Skeptical Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.
- Brennan, Tad. *Ethics and Epistemology in Sextus Empiricus*. New York: Garland, 1999.
- Burnyeat, Miles, ed. *The Skeptical Tradition*. California: University of California Press, 1983.
- Burnyeat, Myles and Frede, Michael. *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett: 1997.
- Cohen, A. "Sextus Empiricus: Skepticism as a Therapy." *Philosophical Forum* 15 (1984): 405-424.
- Floridi, Luciano. *Sextus Empiricus: The Transmission and Recovery of Pyrrhonism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Groarke, Leo. *Greek Skepticism*. Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1990.
- Hankinson, R.J. *The Sceptics*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Irwin, Terence, ed. *Hellenistic Philosophy*. Hamden CT: Garland Publishing, 1995.
- Long, A.A. *Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptic*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.
- . "Sextus Empiricus on the Criterion of Truth." *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 25 (1978): 35-49.
- Mates, Benson. *The Skeptic Way*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. "Skeptic Purgatives: Therapeutic Argument in Ancient Skepticism." *Journal of the History of Philosophy*. 29 (1991): 521-557.
- . *The Therapy of Desire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994 [280-315].
- Patrick, Mary Mills. *The Greek Sceptics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1929.
- Perin, Casey. *The Demands of Reason: An Essay on Pyrrhonian Scepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Stroud, B. *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984.
- Stough, Charlotte. *Greek Skepticism: A Study in Epistemology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
- Thorsrud, Harald. *Ancient Skepticism*. Stocksfield, UK: Acumen, 2009.

Michael S. Russo. *Ancient Wisdom for Modern Minds*. New York: SophiaOmni Press, 2011.

© Michael S. Russo, 2011. This text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.