

Pyrrhonian Skepticism in Diogenes Laertius

Scripta Antiquitatis Posterioris
ad Ethicam REligionemque pertinentia
XXV

Mohr Siebeck

SAPERE

Scripta Antiquitatis Posterioris
ad Ethicam RELigionemque pertinentia

Schriften der späteren Antike
zu ethischen und religiösen Fragen

Herausgegeben von
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Band XXV



Pyrrhonian Skepticism in Diogenes Laertius

Introduction, Text, Translation, Commentary
and Interpretative Essays by

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Lorenzo Corti, Tiziano Dorandi,
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SAPERE

Greek and Latin texts of Later Antiquity (1st–4th centuries AD) have for a long time been overshadowed by those dating back to so-called ‘classical’ times. The first four centuries of our era have, however, produced a cornucopia of works in Greek and Latin dealing with questions of philosophy, ethics, and religion that continue to be relevant even today. The series SAPERE (Scripta Antiquitatis Posterioris ad Ethicam Religionemque pertinentia, ‘Writings of Later Antiquity with Ethical and Religious Themes’), now funded by the German Union of Academies, undertakes the task of making these texts accessible through an innovative combination of edition, translation, and commentary in the form of interpretative essays.

The acronym ‘SAPERE’ deliberately evokes the various connotations of *sapere*, the Latin verb. In addition to the intellectual dimension – which Kant made the motto of the Enlightenment by translating ‘*sapere aude*’ with ‘dare to use thy reason’ – the notion of ‘tasting’ should come into play as well. On the one hand, SAPERE makes important source texts available for discussion within various disciplines such as theology and religious studies, philology, philosophy, history, archaeology, and so on; on the other, it also seeks to whet the readers’ appetite to ‘taste’ these texts. Consequently, a thorough scholarly analysis of the texts, which are investigated from the vantage points of different disciplines, complements the presentation of the sources both in the original and in translation. In this way, the importance of these ancient authors for the history of ideas and their relevance to modern debates come clearly into focus, thereby fostering an active engagement with the classical past.

Preface to this Volume

Diogenes Laertius' report on Pyrrhonian skepticism occupies part of Book IX of his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (§§61–116). Diogenes writes in the 3rd century CE, and his account of Pyrrhonian skepticism covers roughly four hundred years of the history of Pyrrhonism. It is divided into two chapters, one devoted to Pyrrho and more generally to Pyrrhonian skepticism, and a much shorter chapter devoted to Timon, Pyrrho's student. Next to Sextus Empiricus' writings, Diogenes' report is the most detailed and philosophically sophisticated description of Pyrrhonian skepticism.

This volume offers a new English translation, printed next to the Greek text generously supplied by Tiziano Dorandi, as well as a range of scholarly essays by experts on ancient skepticism. As part of the SAPERE series, it aims to make a lesser known ancient text accessible to a wider audience. The contributors to the volume are specialists in classics and philosophy, approaching the text from a wide range of perspectives. The translation and essays were discussed at a workshop at Columbia University in October 2013. Great thanks are due to the series editors as well as to all contributors for much valued feedback on every component of this book. Sam McVane, Ph.D. student in the Classical Studies Program at Columbia University, did invaluable research assistant work. Elizabeth Scharffenberger, a classicist specializing in ancient poetry and intellectual history, and Katja Maria Vogt, who works in ancient philosophy and normative epistemology/ethics, are jointly responsible for the translation and the commentary. Given the philosophical density of the text, the commentary contains brief summaries of relevant sections, as well as notes on particular points. Vogt is also responsible for the general introduction to the text.

The volume contains five essays. It begins with a general discussion of Diogenes' account of Pyrrhonian skepticism by Richard Bett, a philosopher specializing in ancient skepticism and more generally ancient philosophy, as well as Nietzsche. Bett's editions of several of Sextus Empiricus' treatises are well known, as is his monograph about Pyrrho. His essay addresses the question of how Diogenes' presentation of Pyrrhonism differs from and compares to Sextus', thus situating the text – and the versions of skepticism Diogenes refers to – vis-à-vis these more widely studied treatises.

In the volume's second essay, James Warren addresses sections of the text (§§67–73) that contain numerous references to early Greek thought. Apparently, skeptical ideas were compared – by the skeptics themselves or by others – with ideas in Pre-Socratic philosophy, Homer, tragedy, and

more. Warren, a specialist in ancient philosophy with particular interests in Pre-socratic and Hellenistic philosophy, looks carefully at each of these references. Up to now, scholars have tended to neglect this side of Diogenes' report, even though it constitutes a significant portion. Warren offers suggestions and analyses for every quote, supplying context and making dense and often cryptic material comprehensible.

The volume's third contribution, by Lorenzo Corti, covers §§74–77, sections in which Diogenes Laertius speaks about skeptical language. In particular, the so-called skeptical formulae are a stock element of Pyrrhonism. In these short and enigmatic pronouncements, which are meant to be non-dogmatic, the skeptics express some of their core ideas. Corti, a specialist in ancient philosophy and philosophy of language, approaches Diogenes' account after having written a monograph on skeptical language. His essay provides close analysis of the text, and detailed comparison with relevant passages in Sextus Empiricus.

The fourth essay, by Christiana Olfert, covers sections of the text – §§69–70, as well as various remarks throughout – that address the nature of skeptical investigation. The Greek word 'skepsis' literally means investigation, and the skeptics self-identify as inquirers. Given that the skeptics routinely arrive at suspension of judgment, scholars have called into question whether this description can be taken seriously. Olfert, a philosopher and specialist in ancient philosophy whose work addresses the nature of practical reason and truth, defends the skeptics against the charge that they are not genuinely investigating.

In the volume's final essay, David Sedley reexamines the most famous tools in skeptical investigation, the so-called modes or tropes. The Pyrrhonists employ several sets of modes of argument, among them the Ten Modes standardly ascribed to Aenesidemus, and the Five Modes standardly ascribed to Agrippa. Philosophers have scrutinized these arguments, although often with greater attention to the versions found in Sextus than in Diogenes. Sedley, a classicist who has published widely in ancient philosophy, including, *inter alia*, editions of Hellenistic texts that are central points of reference in the field, argues that Diogenes Laertius' version of the Ten Modes postdates Sextus' version and improves on it.

New York City, March 2014

Katja Maria Vogt

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A. Introduction

Introduction: Skepticism and Metaphysics in Diogenes Laertius

Katja Maria Vogt

You may not agree with this, but people seem to disagree about pretty much anything. The world looks differently to different cognizers, at different times, in different circumstances. A theory convinces some, but not others. Customs differ. No sense-perception, no proof or premise, and no practice, or so the skeptics argue, can be invoked to demonstrate what the world is really like, which theory is true, or which way to live is good. Because of these and similar considerations, change, disagreement, and difference belong to the basic currency of skeptical investigation.

Scholars of Pyrrhonism tend to focus on the kind of skepticism known from Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Call this version Epistemic Skepticism. Arguably, it can be described entirely in epistemic terms – terms that refer to activities and attitudes such as being puzzled or disturbed, examining premises and arguments, and eventually suspending judgment. Sextus criticizes an earlier form of skepticism which scholars refer to as negative dogmatism. Early Pyrrhonians arrive at negative conclusions to the effect that X does not exist, or that Y is neither F nor F*, for example, that there is no proof, or that honey is neither sweet nor bitter. In doing so, they make claims about the way the world is. And this is precisely, or so Sextus argues, what skeptics *do not do*. In making this observation, Sextus rightly points out that negative pronouncements are just as much claims about the world as positive ones. And yet they are distinctive sorts of claims. If change, disagreement, and difference are as pervasive as skeptics suggest, this presents deep puzzles – puzzles that are likely to disturb anyone with the kind of philosophical disposition skeptics have. Thus even seasoned skeptics who have thought their way through competing accounts of reality, finding fault with all of them, may still feel the pull of metaphysical questions. Doing so, they might revisit the concerns of their skeptical predecessors. Arguably, if Pyrrhonism were better understood, its metaphysical beginnings would gain more philosophical appreciation, perhaps to the extent that one may set aside the dismissive term negative dogmatism. In this spirit, I will instead use the term Metaphysically Inclined Pyrrhonism to designate the ideas of early skeptics who seem to

have arrived at conclusions about reality, human thought, language, and action.

In this Introduction, I make some suggestions about ways in which the study of Diogenes' report may alter one's perception of ancient skepticism. To situate these suggestions, a sketch of the nature of Diogenes' report is needed. I shall address what kind of author Diogenes is, the history of Pyrrhonism, the structure of Diogenes' report, and which versions of skepticism it covers (Section 1). To illustrate how interesting Metaphysically Inclined Skepticism may be, I then turn to §§61–73. Here Diogenes talks about Pyrrho, Pyrrho's immediate students, as well as presumed ancestors of skepticism in early Greek thought. Interpreters tend to agree that nothing of philosophical interest can be found in these references to poets and Pre-Socratic thinkers. I shall suggest that the opposite holds (Section 2). My remarks on these matters are brief. They are intended to raise rather than answer questions, pointing the reader to the essays in this volume, to existing contributions in the field, and to what I see as potential topics for future research.

1. Diogenes Laertius' report about Pyrrhonian skepticism

1.1. Doxography

Diogenes Laertius is a so-called doxographer, someone who writes about the views of others. The text translated in this volume is a portion of Book 9 of his extensive treatise, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*.¹ In these *Lives*, Diogenes compiles biographical and philosophical material about a wide range of ancient thinkers. His style thus differs from that of philosophers who lay out arguments relevant to their own approach. It also differs from those who write, as philosophers, about diverging points of view, aiming to discredit them. Sextus Empiricus is the prime example of a skeptic writing in his own voice, with a view to presenting the argumentative resources of an approach he pursues. Sextus aims for a unified account, at least within a given treatise, and most perspicuously in Book 1 of the *Outlines of Skepticism*. In this spirit, he may at times reformulate details of earlier Pyrrhonian material, in ways that make it fit in with the overall picture he sketches. Importantly, this is not what Diogenes does. Nor is Diogenes a critic of skepticism. He does not record skeptical strategies with the implication that they fail. Diogenes' report thus has the potential to add further perspective. This perspective does not bear traces of the 're-

¹ Two recent editions are DORANDI 2013; BRUNSCHWIG 1999.

pair work' that a skeptic philosopher may undertake, nor does it approach skepticism through a hostile lens.

Moreover, Diogenes' report is philosophically subtle in its own way. Scholars often hold doxography in low esteem. Doxographers, it is assumed, provide biographical material as well as some main ideas. They do not attend in any sophisticated way to terminology or the details of philosophical proposals. Whether or not this is a fair generalization, it does not fit Diogenes' chapter entitled "Pyrrho." This text is extraordinarily complex. It presents, in quick succession, philosophically difficult ideas, many of which are only comprehensible against the background of earlier ancient discussions.² For example, Diogenes speaks in great detail about the skeptical expression *ouden mallon*, roughly, "no more this than that" (74–8). This expression goes back to Pre-Socratic philosophy. It has received any number of interpretations, including skeptical ones. In this and other instances, Diogenes does not adopt the presumed mode of doxography, skipping particularities and focusing on 'the main idea'. His report is rich in detail, to the extent that §§74–8 by themselves can contribute significantly to our understanding of skepticism.³ Generally speaking, our text does not seem to be composed by someone who is unaware of the details of skeptic philosophy, or who does not care to report them in precise and accurate terms.

1.2. The structure of the text

In an influential article, Jonathan Barnes divides Diogenes' chapter on Pyrrho into four parts⁴: an introductory section, 61–62, with a condensed account of Pyrrho's philosophy; anecdotal material, 63–69; observations on Pyrrho's successors, combined with a list of putative precursors, 69–73; and finally the longest part, 74–108, devoted to Pyrrhonian philosophy.⁵ The chapter on Timon, then, takes up the rest of the text (109–116). For the purposes of further discussion, a more fine-grained division into sections will be helpful:

- 61–68 Pyrrho's biography and main ideas
- 69–73 Pyrrho's students and predecessors
- 74–78 Skeptical expressions and skeptical language
- 78–88 Ten Modes (Modes of Aenesidemus)

² For this reason, the present volume includes an extensive commentary, with notes on expressions and formulations that have a long history in ancient discussions, or are too compressed to be clear to anyone who has not studied related matters.

³ Lorenzo Corti's contribution to this volume discusses these paragraphs in detail.

⁴ BARNES 1992.

⁵ David Sedley's contribution to this volume is devoted to one centerpiece of this section of the text, namely the Ten Modes or Modes of Aenesidemus.

- 88–89 Five Modes (Modes of Agrippa)
- 90–102 Skeptic investigations
- 102–108 Anti-skeptical challenges and skeptical replies
- 109–116 Timon

Consider in comparison the structure of Sextus Empiricus' writings:⁶

PH 1: An outline of what skepticism is.

PH 2–3 and *M* 7–11: Skeptical investigations in the three philosophical disciplines: logic, physics, ethics.

M 1–6: Skeptical investigations in further fields of: arithmetic, geometry, music, rhetoric, grammar, astronomy.

Diogenes' report on skepticism covers many of the topics Sextus discusses in *PH* 1: some anecdotes, the names that the skeptics give to their approach, so-called 'expressions' and skeptical language, skeptical modes of argument, anti-skeptical objections and skeptical responses.⁷ §§90–102 are somewhat similar to *PH* 2–3 and *M* 7–11. Central questions in logic, physics, and ethics are investigated in skeptical manner. Though Diogenes offers some brief remarks about fields of learning in general, there is no analogue to Sextus' discussions of arithmetic, geometry, grammar, rhetoric, astronomy and music.

1.3. Pyrrhonian skepticism and its Hellenistic interlocutors

Almost nothing is known about Diogenes' own life, to the extent that even his biographical data are controversial. Roughly, it is assumed that he lived in the 3rd century CE. Scholars have tried to determine his lifespan relative to that of Sextus Empiricus. Sextus and one of his students are the latest skeptics Diogenes mentions. This may indicate when he wrote, or at least when he composed the relevant portion of the text that interests us here. And yet the question of when Sextus lived is just as controversial. Thus it is easier to establish a relative chronology, according to which Diogenes writes a few decades after Sextus, than to establish any firm dates.

Diogenes' account of Pyrrhonian skepticism consists of two chapters, one devoted to Pyrrho (365/60–275/70 BCE) and more generally speaking Pyrrhonian skepticism, and a much shorter one to Timon (325/20–235/30 BCE). Most of the material on Timon is anecdotal, to the point of focusing

⁶ In his contribution to this volume, Richard Bett offers a detailed account of the nature of the text, pursuing among other things the specifics of how Diogenes' report relates to Sextus' writings.

⁷ The names that skeptics give to their approach are discussed in Christiana Olfert's contribution to this volume, which picks up from the most basic point on this issue: that *skepsis* means 'investigation'.

on his eccentricities rather than his philosophy. Scholars tend to explore, first and foremost, the chapter on Pyrrho, which covers the complete history of Pyrrhonian skepticism, from its beginnings to its endpoint. Diogenes talks in detail about Pyrrho, his immediate followers, as well as Aenesidemus (1st century BCE), and he includes Agrippa's Five Modes (1st to 2nd century CE). Thus he addresses more than four hundred years of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Sextus' biographical dates are hard to establish; scholars place him either in the 2nd or 3rd century.⁸ For present purposes, this means that Sextus' skepticism is likely to be among the spectrum of approaches that Diogenes is aware of.

The main ideas of Pyrrhonian skepticism seem to have been formulated in Hellenistic times.⁹ In reconstructing Pyrrhonian arguments, scholars consider Stoics, Epicureans, and Academic skeptics as critics and/or competitors of the Pyrrhonians.¹⁰ That is, even though Sextus and Diogenes write in post-Hellenistic times, the relevant points of reference seem to belong mostly to the era of Academic skepticism, as well as Stoic and Epicurean philosophy.¹¹ Arguably, the Hellenistic philosophers are quite generally concerned with strategies for avoiding judgments that may turn out to be false. They take different routes in addressing this concern. Epicureans propose a distinction between the truth of all sense-perceptions and the potential of judgment to go wrong. They offer norms for belief-formation, geared toward keeping an open mind when phenomena allow for several explanations, and accepting as true only what is in agreement with sense perception. Academic skeptics investigate in ways that are much indebted to Socratic methods, arriving at suspension of judgment and thereby avoiding *doxa*, belief. The Stoics argue that wise cognizers assent only when they have cognitive impressions, which make it clear by themselves that they present things precisely as they are.¹² Much more could be said. For present purposes, however, the upshot is that Diogenes

⁸ For more detail, cf. Richard Bett's contribution to this volume.

⁹ A more detailed account of these matters is offered in K. M. VOGT, "Ancient Skepticism", in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2010): <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/skepticism-ancient/>>; and BETT 2010.

¹⁰ In these Hellenistic discussions, however, Plato – and in particular some dialogues such as the *Theaetetus* – play a major role. Moreover, Agrippa's Five Modes seem to engage with arguments known from Aristotle.

¹¹ Pyrrho is, roughly, a contemporary of Epicurus. Traditionally, scholars focused specifically on exchanges and relations between Stoic and skeptic philosophy. More recently, the role of Epicurean philosophy as interlocutor, critic, and competitor of skepticism has been recognized as important.

¹² Cf. G. STRIKER, *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge 1996); BURNYEAT / FREDE 1997 (a collection of articles by J. Barnes, M. F. Burnyeat, and M. Frede, beginning with a [1979] paper by Frede that spearheaded contemporary interest in ancient skepticism). Specifically on the question of avoiding assent and judgment in Stoic, Epicurean, and skeptic philosophy, cf. VOGT 2012, and VOGT 2012b.

writes about ideas that were formulated over a period of more than 400 years, responding mostly to arguments from Hellenistic philosophy.

1.4. Which skepticism?

It is the merit of Richard Bett's *Pyrrho, his Antecedents, and his Legacy* to have pointed out that Pyrrho may not have been a skeptic in Sextus' sense of the term.¹³ In response to the observation that the world appears differently to different people (at different times, in different circumstances, and so on), Pyrrho seems to infer that reality is indeterminate.¹⁴ It is, in terms of the expression mentioned a moment ago, 'no more one way than another'. Our sense-perceptions and beliefs about the world do not capture any reality. Accordingly we should not hold anything to be true. And thus Pyrrho is, at least in some respects, not a skeptic in the sense that his successors emphasize: someone who continues to investigate, not having settled the question of how things are. Instead, he seems to put forward a view about the nature of reality, and recommends cognitive attitudes that reflect this view.

Between Pyrrho and Sextus, skepticism undergoes significant developments. In particular, Aenesidemus and Agrippa are innovative thinkers. Diogenes often flags which skeptical philosopher he is referring to, and to some extent his report can be read as covering the history of Pyrrhonian ideas. But often he mentions the names of lesser known skeptics, and at other times he just speaks of 'the skeptics'. Thus it can be difficult to determine, at many points in the text, which version of skepticism he has in mind.

Notably, Diogenes gives pride of place to the beginnings of Pyrrhonism. Pyrrho figures as more than the namesake of a line of thought that – as it were luckily – developed further. Instead, he and his immediate followers are treated as serious philosophers. Scholars have long noted traces of, in their terms, negative dogmatism in Diogenes' report. Adopting Sextus' perspective, they have largely set it aside as philosophically less interesting than the kind of skepticism known from Sextus. In Sextus, one does not see a fascination with phenomena of change, disagreement, and difference. Skeptics, it is presumed, *initially* were disturbed by discrepancies

¹³ BETT 2000.

¹⁴ The crucial evidence is contained in the following quote: "...things are equally indifferently and unstable and indeterminate (*adiaphora kai astathmêta kai anepikrita*); for this reason, neither our perceptions nor our beliefs tell the truth or lie (*adoxastous kai aklineis kai akradantous*). For this reason, then, we should not trust them, but should be without opinions and without inclinations and without wavering, saying about each single thing that it no more is than is not, or both is and is not, or neither is nor is not (*ou mallon estin ê ouk estin ê kai esti kai ouk estin ê oute estin oute ouk estin*)" (Aristocles in Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.18.1–5 = DC53; trans. BETT 2000 with changes).

and wanted to find out what is true and false (*PH* 1.12). But as they go along, as Sextus does in his discussions of logic, physics and ethics, it can appear as if they simply adopted a certain mode of investigation. What may be missing, then, is a genuine desire to get clear about things. And yet this kind of motivation is an important component of the skeptical enterprise. Why else would skeptics *continue* to investigate, if not that, in addition to being puzzled by the relevant phenomena, they also want to figure out what is true or false? Early versions of skepticism may preserve some of the pull toward metaphysics that, in one way or another, must be part of the skeptics' motivations, if they really do care sufficiently about the questions they investigate.

2. Beginnings and Ancestors

2.1. Skepticism: departure or continuity?

In §§69–73 of our text, any number of quotations from early Greek thinkers and poets are cited as expressing ideas relevant to Pyrrhonian skepticism.¹⁵ Diogenes suggests, or so I propose, that Pyrrho and his followers adduced these quotes, claiming earlier authors as ancestors of their thought. If this is what he does, Diogenes' account of Pyrrhonism may provide material for future research on questions that are as-of-yet neglected. Let me elaborate.

The idea that Pyrrhonism is continuous with trends in early Greek thought is a significant departure from what, based on Sextus, we know about skepticism. Sextus emphasizes that Pyrrhonian skepticism differs from all other schools of thought. He devotes no less than six chapters to these discussions (*PH* 1.210–41). For him, they serve at least two purposes: to highlight the uniqueness of the Pyrrhonian approach, and to emphasize that skepticism does not make any claims about the way the world is, while every other, seemingly similar philosophy, contains traces of dogmatism.

Diogenes' report may offer a different picture, one according to which some early skeptics see their philosophy as continuous with early Greek thought. I say 'may' because the reconstruction of the text involves some difficult assessments. The very fact that Sextus writes extensively about the differences between Pyrrhonism and other schools suggests that skeptics were confronted with the following charge: you skeptics say that your philosophy is non-dogmatic, and that it thereby differs from all other philosophies; and yet there are a number of other thinkers who say pretty much the same things that you say, and who are dogmatists, even by *your* lights. This objection addresses both of Sextus' points: it disputes the uniqueness of Pyrrhonian skepticism, and it makes the anti-skeptical argument that,

¹⁵ James Warren's contribution to this volume aims to remedy scholarly neglect of these citations. Warren offers detailed analysis of each citation.

despite professions to the contrary, the skeptics also hold doctrines. Perhaps the fact that Diogenes includes a wide range of early Greek quotes – quotes that presumably express ideas similar to Pyrrhonism – means that he includes anti-skeptical material? In §§71–2, he refers to ‘some’ who say that Homer originated skepticism, and ‘some’ who add several poets and Pre-Socratics to the list of skeptic ancestors. Who is making these comparisons: the skeptics themselves or their critics?

When Sextus emphasizes the differences between skepticism and other approaches, he exclusively refers to philosophical and medical schools of thought, not to poetry.¹⁶ This suggests that, if there was a pool of quotes that was employed to demonstrate that skeptics too were dogmatists, it did not include the citations from poetry that are prominent components of our text. Further, Diogenes does not signal that he takes himself to be reporting anti-skeptical material. He devotes a large subsection of the text to anti-skeptical challenges and skeptical replies (§§102–8). There, he mentions two presumed similarities, namely between skeptics and Democritus as well as Epicurus (§106); but he does not return to the relevant ideas from poetry. And Diogenes is clear about the following: Pyrrho admired Homer, regularly quoted him, and praised him for views expressed in the citations (§§67–8). Moreover, there is no indication in the text that Homer alone is held in high regard. Instead, Homer seems to spearhead a list of authors, including the seven sages and early philosophers, invoked by Pyrrho and like-minded early Pyrrhonians. If this is correct, the strategy Diogenes records is quite unlike anything in Sextus. Rather than suggest that everyone else’s views are misguided, early skepticism may invoke earlier revered thinkers as authorities whom it is good to have at one’s side.

2.2. The ‘dogmatism’ of the quotes

Arguably, the quotes from early Greek authors are an ill fit for the kind of skepticism associated with Sextus. Verses from poetry, enigmatic sayings by sages, and excerpts from Pre-Socratic philosophers tend to allow for multiple interpretations. At times, they may appear intentionally cryptic, suggestive of more than one idea. And yet, as Diogenes reports the quotes, they tend to have dogmatic upshots. Claims are made about the nature of the world, about human life, thought, agency, and speech. Consider an example that goes to the heart of skeptical philosophy. “Make a commitment, delusion is nearby” is ascribed to one of the seven sages and cited by skeptics as expressing the spirit of their philosophy. Skeptics of the variant that Sextus discusses cannot issue such verdicts. They may, at best, report that they themselves experience commitments as a source of turmoil. To

¹⁶ The only bit of verse in Sextus’ discussions of these matters comes from Timon (*PH* 1.224).

go beyond this, and to claim that commitments are a symptom or cause of a distorted state of mind, would be dogmatic. What should one make of the fact that skeptics, according to Diogenes, quote early Greek thinkers with similar pronouncements?

One line of interpretation may invoke considerations from the philosophy of language. To quote is not to assert. Thus quoting someone else might be a way of availing oneself of an idea without committing to it, and without putting it forward *in propria persona*. Quoting a sentence that employs metaphors bordering on the obscure and that allows for several interpretations may be an even more intricate way of not affirming anything. Who is to say what claim a poetic verse, a pithy saying, or an out-of-context line from Pre-Socratic philosophy 'really' makes? It would be in the spirit of Sextus' skepticism to exploit quotations in such manners, advancing evocative ideas without endorsing any claims themselves.¹⁷ And yet, even though Diogenes has much to say about skeptical expressions, he does not report anything to this effect.

Thus there is good reason to consider a different interpretation. The skeptics Diogenes refers to may not be as averse to putting forward ideas about the nature of the world, human thought, and so on, as later skeptics are. They may quote earlier thinkers as expressing thoughts that they too embrace, exploiting to some extent the obscurity and metaphorical nature of the quotes, but nevertheless endorsing what they take to be their upshot. If this is plausible, the citations from early Greek authors gain relevance for the study of early Pyrrhonism. Contrary to Barnes' assumption that the philosophically interesting material in Diogenes is exclusively located in §§74–108, the focus on ancestors in §§61–73 may offer substantial evidence for Metaphysically Inclined Skepticism.

2.3. Skeptical scenarios

The early thinkers whom Diogenes' skeptics invoke have a reputation for depth and profundity. Moreover, some of these early figures, though held in high honor, are fearlessly subversive. When scholarship on ancient skepticism was reinvigorated in the late 1970s, philosophers were less attuned to the differences between ancient and modern skepticism than they are today. Myles Burnyeat, in an influential early paper, "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed," could plausibly ask whether the ancient skeptics failed to see the threat of external world skepticism.¹⁸ Part of the thrust of his question was to inquire how

¹⁷ Cf. VOGT 1998, chapter 2.2 on the way in which quoting and reporting the views of others figures in skeptical language.

¹⁸ M. F. BURNYEAT, "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed", *Philosophical Review* 91 (1982) 3–40.

radical ancient skeptics were. To be ‘radical’ as a philosopher is, presumably, a good thing, at least if what is meant by this is rigor and imagination. Did the skeptics fail in not being rigorous thinkers, stopping short of drawing the inferences that follow from their own premises? Did they lack philosophical imagination in not raising the kinds of questions later skeptics asked?

Rather than wonder why the ancient skeptics did not come up with external world skepticism, one may think that they were right not to. Medieval and early modern premises about the mind, as entirely different from anything in the physical world, are alien to them. Instead of pursuing Burnyeat’s question, one may ask whether there are ‘radical’ skeptical scenarios not wedded to the premises about mind and world that are formulated in medieval and early modern philosophy. What if one thinks through, rigorously and with imagination, the framing concerns of early Greek puzzles about conflicting appearances and the fleeting nature of human life, human thought, and speech? Diogenes’ report offers clues on this question. Some of the citations from poets and Pre-Socratic philosophers suggest scenarios worthy of the most fearless skeptic.

For example, as Diogenes has it, Pyrrho embraces Homer’s observation “[l]ike leaves on trees, such is the generation of men” (*Il.* 6.146). A human being may think of herself as rather different from a leaf. Her life may appear to her shaped by decisions and pursuits particular to her. It may appear to be an intricate story, and hopefully distinctive. A leaf, however, lives just for one season. Its life’s structure seems to be, simply, that of birth, growth, decay, and death; and it is but a component of a larger organism, growing out of the tree and sustaining the tree. And yet, if a different context of evaluation is presupposed – if one stands back, looking at human life from a distance, considering, say, the many who died at Troy and the many who came after them – a human life can seem just as short as that of a leaf and just like that of other people, tied up with the life of others, and composed of events that affect everyone in just about the same way.

From this perspective, it is not far-fetched to compare human beings to leaves on trees, as well as to wasps and flies and birds. Pyrrho, according to Diogenes, admired Homer for drawing precisely these comparisons (§67). Arguably, the thought of one’s life as similar to that of a fly or a leaf is as radical as the thought of a mind-without-world, or in today’s terms, a brain in a vat. Those philosophers who entertain external world skepticism may marvel at what they take to be *best* about human beings – the mind – and be rather smitten with its perceived complexity. The instinct of the early skeptical scenario that emerges via Pyrrho’s approval of Homeric ideas, on the contrary, is deflationary. Its challenge is not how a human cognizer

can be in touch with the physical world at all. Its challenge is whether a human cognizer is at all different from it.

Several of the citations from early Greek thinkers suggest that human beings do not acquire their views through active belief-formation, coming to think that something is so-and-so based on consideration of evidence or reasons. Instead, beliefs grow on us. We come to think of the world in ways that are non-transparent to us, caused by non-rational means such as conventions and custom (say, we come to see our own culture's funerary rites as correct), or, at the other end of a spectrum, prompted by the attractions of the rare (say, gold strikes us as precious). Moreover, perhaps the gods decide for us, and our actions issue from *their* considerations for what is to happen next, not ours. This is an idea that Diogenes says the skeptics invoked. It may be hubris to conceive of oneself as a deliberator, who sets herself in motion based on her own plans. Several of the quotes that Diogenes adduces undermine our self-conception as reasoners who convey information when we speak, act based on our own choices, and arrive at conclusions based on our own reflections. Human speech appears like chatter or the sounds of nature; the gods or fate or some other force makes us do what we perceive as our agency; thoughts crop up in our minds for any number of reasons unrelated to our own cognitive achievements.

2.4. Turning the tables

If early skeptics thought along similar lines, then the burden of proof in some of the most famous exchanges between skeptics and dogmatists is shifted away from the skeptic. Consider the best-known anti-skeptical objection, the so-called Apraxia Challenge. Here dogmatists argue that skeptics, if indeed they suspend judgment, cannot act. Implicitly, they work with a premise that is shared by many action theorists today: that motivation involves beliefs. Agents believe that they should perform such-and-such an action, or that such-and-such an outcome is good. Reconstructions of ancient skepticism assume that the skeptics must demonstrate that, though they suspend judgment, their cognitive attitudes are sufficient for playing the action-guiding role that beliefs are standardly taken to play.

But if one takes seriously the picture that emerges from the citations of Homer and other early Greek figures, the burden of proof lies with the dogmatists. How do they know in the first place that we are agents in the robust sense they stipulate, beings motivated by what they believe to be good? The quotes in Diogenes suggest that these premises are based on a self-aggrandizing illusion human beings are prone to: they see themselves as agents guided by their own reasoning. And yet, agency may have a causal explanation, not a rational one. This is a radical skeptical challenge, directed against our self-conception as agents. It undermines our ways of

engaging with the world to such an extent that it is unclear what would be involved in refuting it.

Similar scenarios could be constructed by attending to the quotes about human language and belief. Evidently, they are speculative. But they are philosophically rich, and they present serious challenges. As of today, philosophers still worry whether agency in the sense of setting oneself in motion via one's own deliberation and choice is merely an illusion. They continue to ask whether utterances, though they have the surface structure of assertions, may just express some state of mind of the agent, rather than conveying information about the world. Similarly, they study how causes rather than reasons figure in the acquisition of beliefs. Diogenes' inclusion of early Pyrrhonian references to poets and Pre-Socratics may cast new light on some of the most cherished topics in research on skepticism: action, language, and belief.¹⁹

3. Acknowledgements

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¹⁹ I'm much indebted to Jens Haas for input on several versions of this Introduction, as well as manifold support in the process leading up to this volume.