HOW TO KEEP AN OPEN MIND

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INTRODUCTION

Sextus Empiricus and His Works

A skeptical person, as the term is normally used today, is someone who is inclined to be doubtful—who doesn't accept what others tell them without a good deal of persuading. The ancient Greek skeptic with whom we will be concerned here, Sextus Empiricus, certainly has something in common with this person, but he is quite a bit more single-minded about it. He has a series of ready-made techniques for making sure that he (or whoever these techniques are applied on) *never* accepts *anything*—or at least, anything put forward by someone who claims to understand how the world works. Instead, he suspends judgment about all matters

of that kind. And the payoff for this suspension of judgment, he says, is that you are much calmer and less troubled than other people; skepticism actually has a beneficial effect on your life. I will explain all this in more detail shortly. I will also suggest some things we might be able to learn from this outlook, as well as a few difficulties it may cause. But first, a word about who Sextus was and what he wrote.

About Sextus as an individual, we know almost nothing. We know that he was a doctor, and a member of one of the major schools of medical thought at the time, the Empirical school. He lived during the period of the Roman Empire, and presumably somewhere within its boundaries. The best guesses place him as active around 200 CE, or maybe a little later, but this is far from certain. We don't know where he was from or where he lived. He wrote in Greek, but that really doesn't tell us much. In the Roman imperial period Greek was widely

We have three of Sextus' works, two of them complete and a third that is almost certainly incomplete. The most accessible, and the one that will occupy most of this volume, is *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. *Outlines* (I'll often refer to it in this abbreviated form) is in three books—where a "book" was originally a segment of a long work that would conveniently fit on a roll of papyrus. (Plato's *Republic*, for example, is in ten books; the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are each in twenty-four.) The first book is a general introduction to Sextus' brand of skepticism; the second and third then examine the theories of other philosophers (more about them below) in the three main areas of philosophy recognized in later antiquity—logic, physics, and ethics; logic occupies book II, physics and ethics, book III. In addition to *Outlines*, we have two books discussing logic, two others discussing physics, and one other discussing ethics—all these parts of a single work, much longer than *Outlines*, which

Sextus calls *Skeptical Treatises*, and which almost certainly also included (before the books on logic) a general discussion of skepticism, now lost, that would have covered similar ground to the first book of *Outlines*. Sextus frequently reminds us in *Outlines* that he is, in fact, speaking in an "outline" fashion; the surviving books of *Skeptical Treatises* show us how he liked to proceed when not constrained by space. The effect can be somewhat overwhelming if you are not a specialist, or even sometimes if you are. (Trust me—I have translated all of them!) In any case, what we have is, in effect, two editions of the same work, an abbreviated version and a full-length version; the parallels between the two, and also the differences, are often quite interesting.

In addition to these, we have *Against Those in the Disciplines*, which survives complete. It examines the claims of theorists in six different fields: grammar, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic,

astrology, and music. Sextus therefore does not limit his attention to philosophical topics (although there are a few overlaps in material between this work and the other two); anyone who claims expert knowledge on any subject is fair game, as far as he is concerned.

This volume will follow the basic plan of *Outlines*. I will give you a selection of central passages from each of the three books, with a rather greater emphasis on the first, general book than on the second and third books. And I will add very brief pointers to indicate how the pieces connect and what happens in the parts I have not included. I will supplement all this with a few very short excerpts from the other works of Sextus that have something interesting to add to the treatment of a topic in *Outlines*. I have chosen passages that, as much as possible, can be understood without background knowledge about ancient Greek philosophy or the ancient Greco-Roman world.

But occasionally, when a little extra information will help to explain what Sextus is talking about, I will provide this in a note.

Sextus' Brand of Skepticism

So, what does skepticism amount to, in Sextus' hands? As I said, it is a technique, or a set of techniques, for producing suspension of judgment. The best place to start in explaining this is perhaps the first sentence of the section at the beginning of *Outlines* called "What skepticism is" (I.8):[1] "The skeptical ability is one that produces oppositions among things that appear and things that are thought in any way whatsoever, from which, because of the equal strength in the opposing objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment, and after that to tranquility."

There are three stages here. The first thing you do is to "produce oppositions" on some topic. To take an example Sextus actually dis-

cusses, the topic might be whether there are gods. Many different views exist on whether there are gods and what they are like. There are theoretical arguments on both sides, and there are also the impressions of ordinary people; for example, some people claim to have had direct experience of the divine, while others may hold that our everyday experience gives us no reason to believe in any divine power. The skeptic collects all these impressions and arguments ("things that appear and things that are thought") and balances them against one another; since they disagree with one another in all sorts of ways, the result is a whole series of "oppositions." Now, the skeptic who is really skillful does this in such a way that these opposing arguments and impressions each have "equal strength"; that is, the points on either side strike one as equally plausible—neither side seems to have any advantage over the other. And if that is the situation, there seems to be no

there were ancient views along those lines as well). This is the kind of thing the skeptic will suspend judgment about, after assembling competing but equally persuasive theories on the subject.

It is the people who do claim to have figured out the real nature of things, over and above just the way they appear to us—whether in physics, or in ethics, or in any other subject—that Sextus calls "dogmatists." A dogmatist is someone who has definite views about how things are. The Greek word *dogma* (still reflected to some extent in the word "dogma" in modern English) refers to definite views of this kind, and I have translated it by "doctrine." Sextus also sometimes describes a statement or a claim as "dogmatic," and that too means "put forward as a definite view about how things are." The nonskeptical philosophers Sextus discusses all qualify as dogmatists in this sense. But so does anyone else who puts forward theories that pur-

port to go beyond the way things strike us in ordinary experience and to penetrate to the real nature of things. The divide between philosophy and science was by no means as clear in Sextus' time as it is in ours. But a great many modern scientists, particularly the more theoretical kind, would also count as dogmatists in Sextus' usage.

Another word that Sextus often uses in this context is "opinion." An "opinion," in Sextus' usage (which is not unusual in Greek philosophy), is a definite belief that something-or-other is the case—where, again, this goes beyond what is simply apparent in our experience. This is roughly the same as a "doctrine," except that "opinion" covers not only the views of philosophers or other theorists;[2] at one point Sextus tells us that *ordinary people* hold the "opinion" that some things really are good and others really are bad (I.30). By contrast, Sextus frequently reminds us that, as a skeptic, he is

speaking "without opinions"; that is, he is simply describing how things strike him, without claiming to lay down the law about the final truth of the matter.

What about tranquility, the supposed practical benefit of this? The Greek word I translate by "tranquility" is *ataraxia*, which signifies a state of not being troubled or bothered. So the idea is that the skeptic is free from trouble or annoyance, and the implication is that if one is *not* a skeptic, one is afflicted by troubles or annoyances of some kind. What is Sextus talking about here?

There seem to be two somewhat different answers to this question, one of them laid out more clearly than the other. The clearer story is this. Among the definite views people have about the world are views about what things are really good and what things are really bad. As I just noted, it is not only philosophers who hold such views, though they are certainly in-

cluded. Now, if you firmly believe that some things are really good and others really bad, you will be desperate to get, or to keep, the good things, and desperate to avoid the bad things. You are therefore in a permanent state of turmoil and distress, because it matters so much that you have the good things and not the bad things. On the other hand, if you don't have any definite views about what's really good or really bad, but simply follow your inclinations, you will avoid all this frenzy; the stakes, for you, will be much lower, and so you will have tranquility.

This need not be a self-centered or anti-social existence. Your inclinations may very well include a desire to be nice to other people, especially those close to you. And Sextus says that among the "appearances" that guide the skeptic's conduct are the laws and customs of one's society (I.23–4). The key point is that you don't think anything is desperately important (as you

would if you were convinced that some things were really good and others really bad), and so your life is calm and relatively trouble-free. Sextus acknowledges that being a skeptic won't free you from unpleasant things like hunger or physical pain. But even here, he says, a skeptic comes off more easily; if you are convinced that hunger or pain is really something bad, that gives you an extra thing to worry about beyond just the hunger or pain itself.

This, as I say, is one of the lines of thought Sextus gives us about why suspension of judgment yields tranquility. But he talks about much more than just good and bad. And in his opening description of what skepticism is, which we looked at earlier, he seems to be saying that suspension of judgment on *any* topic—not just good and bad—yields tranquility. Sextus does not spell out so clearly why this should be true, but I think we can see what he intends.

tranquility, and the release from striving that (on either of the two accounts) accompanies it, that today's readers most often tend to find reminiscent of Buddhist ideas.

The general account of skepticism that I have sketched throughout this section appears mostly in book I of *Outlines*, and especially in the opening pages that I have marked out as the first chapter, "Skepticism: The Big Picture."[3] The other two books of *Outlines*, and all the surviving books from Sextus' other works, are then designed to do the job of producing suspension of judgment on a great many different topics.

What We Can Take from This

I have tried to explain the central points of Sextus' skepticism in a sympathetic fashion, but without taking any kind of stand for or against it. And while some scholars would probably disagree about a few points in my account, it is

well within the mainstream of how Sextus is currently understood. But now let's raise the question, how much of this skeptical outlook can still represent a viable way of thinking for us today?

I think there is room for reservations about two of the three stages I identified at the beginning of the last section. First, we can ask, is it realistic to think that if we suspended judgment, we would get tranquility? And the answer, it seems to me, is "It depends." It depends on the circumstances, and it depends on the temperament of the individual. This is true, I think, for both of the explanations Sextus offers. Turning first to the trauma caused by beliefs about things being really good or really bad: we can certainly think of cases where people take things too seriously—where they treat something as desperately important that most of us don't see as all that important and

would be much calmer if they were not so convinced about how much this thing *really matters*. But there are also surely some people whose firm moral convictions, including a clear-eyed sense that some things really *are* important, keep them on an even keel and therefore much calmer than they would be if they were unsure about these things.

As for the other explanation, centered on the trauma associated with attempting to discover the truth: again, we can imagine a researcher hopelessly frustrated with the way their research is going, whose only route to tranquility would be to give up on the research altogether. But we can also imagine someone utterly immersed in a research project, whose peace of mind comes precisely from the sense that, whether the project succeeds or not, they are doing everything they can to find the answers—and who would be devastated if, for some reason, the research

was cut off at a point when they were (as they had hoped, only temporarily) suspending judgment between two opposing alternatives.

These examples could be filled out; other ones could be devised. But the point is clear enough. It is certainly possible for suspension of judgment on some question to lead to tranquility. But when Sextus speaks as if the one is a predictable and reliable recipe for the other, this is hard to accept.[4] And I don't think this point has anything to do with differences between our time and his. While the skeptics' ancient critics (of whom there were plenty) did not, as far as we can tell, focus on this feature of the Pyrrhonist outlook, it seems to me that this criticism would have been just as available to them, given standard assumptions of the time, as it is to us.

Now let's go back to the previous stage. Leaving aside the question of what the benefits of suspending judgment might be, is it realistic

to think that suspension of judgment can be produced on all questions concerning the real nature of things? Here I think there *is* a difference between Sextus' time and ours. With all due respect to the engineering feats of the Roman Empire, which were considerable, it is fair to say that the level of scientific understanding in Sextus' day, compared with the present, was almost unimaginably primitive. And this made it much easier for questions about how the world works to end up in unresolved dispute. To take just one example that Sextus briefly alludes to (I.147, in chapter 2): is the basic structure of matter atomic, or does it consist of a continuous stuff that is uniform down to the most microscopic level? Both views had their adherents, who used sophisticated arguments in their support; but no one had any knock-down argument that clinched the case. And given the lack of experimental techniques, abstract argument was all they had. In these circumstances,

Sextus' text, I have chosen to use them in the title of this volume because I think that is one thing Sextus may still be able to help us do. What he gives us is an example—an extreme example, perhaps—of always being willing to consider opposing points of view, and never settling for some definite answer when there is something still to be said on the other side. As you will see, he frequently calls his dogmatic opponents "rash." And "rashness"—that is, jumping to conclusions too easily—is something his example can help us to guard against.

Now, it's a bit more complicated than this. For I do not mean to suggest that Sextus himself is exactly open-minded. An open-minded person is someone who wants to achieve a clear-eyed and unbiased view on an issue, in light of all relevant information. An attitude of this kind will certainly include the desire to avoid rash conclusions. But it will not include the ambition to avoid *all* conclusions—which is what

Sextus' agenda of generating suspension of judgment (and thereby tranquility) across the board in effect amounts to. On the contrary, an open-minded person will give due consideration to all sides of an argument and will draw conclusions when warranted. Sometimes the state of the evidence will not allow this, and in that case an open-minded person will indeed suspend judgment. But sometimes, after careful consideration, one answer will appear superior to all the others, and in that case the open-minded person will not hesitate to draw that conclusion—with the recognition, of course, that new information or new perspectives could lead to a change of view. In other words, the open-minded person is aiming to find the most justifiable view available on the topic at hand. And that is rather different from Sextus' project of inducing suspension of judgment.

But if Sextus is not a paragon of open-mindedness, that does not mean that *we* cannot

find in his writings a stimulus toward open-mindedness. This is where my earlier reservations again become relevant. If suspension of judgment cannot be counted upon to produce tranquility, and if we know too much today for *universal* suspension of judgment to be feasible anyway, then the first stage in Sextus' method—assembling "oppositions"—comes to look somewhat different. Examining as many different sides of an issue as possible[5] will sometimes lead to suspension of judgment (and perhaps even to tranquility as a result). But at other times, given the current state of knowledge, one point of view on that issue will emerge as more plausible than all the others, and hence more deserving of acceptance—at least for now. We arrive, then, at something very much like the open-mindedness I sketched in the previous paragraph. So while it would not really be accurate to say that Sextus advocates being open-minded, a recommenda-

tion to be open-minded is, in effect, what one can gain from approaching his writings in a sympathetic yet critical spirit.

In a world where it can often seem that almost no factual issue of importance is immune from manipulation, this may not be a bad thing. To take one easy example, think of all the cases where someone's conviction in a trial is shown to have been mistaken, sometimes after the person has spent decades in prison—or even been executed; maybe if juries really took seriously the words "beyond a reasonable doubt," this would happen less frequently. And readers can no doubt think of many cases where facts are reported in starkly different ways, often to suit different political or other agendas, by different public figures, media outlets, etc. It surely makes sense for anyone trying to approach these matters in a thoughtful and constructive fashion to gather as wide a

range of information as possible and assess it as carefully as possible.

Of course, even when there is agreement on the facts, there can still be disagreement on what to do about them, because of differing value judgments among the people involved. As I said, ethical and political questions are very often subjects of unresolved debate, and it is on questions of that kind (unlike much of natural science) that Sextus' program of suspension of judgment may seem to have the most to recommend it, intellectually speaking. Yet this is a luxury that only those not engaged with real ethical and political problems can generally afford; and for this reason the skeptic has often been seen as a parasite, whose ivory-tower suspension of judgment is only possible against a background of active decision-making and social involvement—of policies and laws being written and implemented, of arguments being made for why these are appropriate (or not ap-

taking other sides of a question seriously, and keeping the conversation permanently open, are important to a flourishing democratic culture. By contrast, autocratic regimes can't stand endless debate and do their best to shut it down. If we find this picture persuasive, the open-mindedness I have been talking about—not identical with Sextus' skepticism but inspired by it—clearly sits better with democracy than with the alternative.

Again, then, if we don't try to go all the way with Sextus, but still take his method seriously where we can, we may find something useful. To conclude: if Sextus can serve as a model for us, it is perhaps as a model of willingness to look at all sides of any question and not to judge things too quickly—something we could probably use more of in the present state of the world.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION

This volume presents a selection of the work of Sextus Empiricus in translation, with the original Greek text on facing pages. Almost all the selections are from Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, and the layout broadly follows that of *Outlines*. The division into six chapters, and the titles of those chapters, are my own. The headings within chapters are from Sextus—or at least, there is no good reason to doubt this. In the original manuscripts these are numbered, and in translations this is usually represented by Roman numerals; but since these numbers are rarely used in referring to passages, and since they would not always be in sequence given that this is a selection, I have omitted them as a needless complication. What are commonly