

# **The Significance of *Radical* Scepticism**

**An inquiry into the philosophy of Sextus Empiricus and Friedrich Nietzsche**

Stijn van der Leest

Student nr: 3292975

E-mail: s.vanderleest@students.uu.nl

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Supervisor: Prof. dr. Paul Ziche

Second reader: Dr. Janneke van Lith

Third reader: Dr. Niels van Miltenburg

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# INTRODUCTION: REHABILITATING PHILOSOPHICAL SCEPTICISM

## The persistence of a pseudo-problem

When confronted with radical forms of scepticism, experienced philosophers usually exhibit one of the following reactions: bewilderment, anger, disgust, scornful laughter, a disinterested shrug of the shoulders, plain disregard. Those willing to test their intellectual patience and actually willing to engage with the sceptic's unpleasant inferences are almost unanimous in their verdict: some of the arguments might be sound but his sceptical conclusions are to be avoided at all costs. Certain scenarios – involving deceiving demons, mad non-spatiotemporal scientists or brains-in-vats – are allowed to function as the bizarre starting point for further epistemic enquiry, yet scepticism itself is regarded an argumentative dead-end; an appendix to philosophical thought not worth too much of our precious analytical attention.

One could wonder what motivates the sceptical thinker to categorically reject human knowledge? What does he want to achieve? Elucidation here is hard to come by, since scepticism enjoys the dubious privilege of being defined almost exclusively by its philosophical adversaries. In light of the absence of actual proponents there is something to be said for the anti-sceptical attitude just described: scepticism seems to be a form of sophism rather than a philosophical vocation. Yet as such, it still is a confusing phenomenon. The term 'scepticism,' originally coined by Sextus Empiricus as a derivation of *sképtesthai*, 'to critically examine,' has become synonymous for both *doubt* and the *outright denial* of things. And whatever the proper sceptical attitude is, it is even less clear what it is *about*: 'global scepticism' is reported to question a host of affairs, including the existence of the external world, our ordinary beliefs about it, ordinary belief in general, ordinary knowledge, all forms of knowledge whatsoever, the existence of facts in any relevant sense, the validity of rational deliberation, the reliability of the senses, the adequacy of our philosophical and scientific methods etc etc.

One may well argue that this lack of conceptual unity only indicates a much deeper sceptical problem. The fact that we cannot comprehensively define what constitutes the common core of all these more-or-less familiar forms of doubt brings to the fore a deep sense of rational disagreement with regard to the core concepts of *truth*

and *falsehood* themselves. Contemporary *epistemists*<sup>1</sup> however have succeeded quite adequately in avoiding direct confrontation with this many-faced monstrosity. Consciously or not, they have warded off philosophical misfortune only by overlooking the heterogeneous character of doubt, focusing instead on the particularly dysfunctional epistemic archetype of *scepticism about the external world*. One need only take a critical look at this illusionary anti-sceptical legacy to expose the deeper problem: the whimsical nature of human thought.

### **An epistemist analysis of scepticism**

The abovementioned coping strategy is exemplified in Peter Klein's SEP entry on *Skepticism*, dedicated to the forms of global doubt "that contemporary philosophers still find interesting." Scepticism is reputed to question our knowledge "in many, if not all, domains in which we ordinarily think knowledge is possible." Klein then identifies two available strategies: Academic scepticism typically employs Cartesian scenario's in order to reject the idea that "our ordinary picture of the world is "right—or right enough—." Pyrrhonian scepticism— with Sextus Empiricus as its main, if not only spokesman — neither confirms nor denies whether such claims can be substantiated by resorting to the Agrippan Trilemma. Klein argues that the debate between sceptics and epistemists revolves around the issue of *evidentialism*, the question of how are knowledge claims (claims that we ordinarily think refer to 'the external world') could be "adequately justified." In this context, the hyperbolic scenarios of Cartesianism seem to hinge on an overly ambitious principle of knowledge; it requires us to first *eliminate all doubt*. Hence:

The issue seems to boil down to this: Is it true that there is some context in which "know" is properly used by an attributer only when the skeptical hypothesis has been eliminated?

Clearly, the appropriate answer here is: 'no.' Having defined 'scepticism' as 'the rejection of ordinary knowledge,' and 'knowledge' as that which is brought about by ordinary

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<sup>1</sup> I employ this somewhat uncommon substitute for 'epistemologist' in a similar manner as Peter Klein, to designate those who assent to non-ordinary, epistemic knowledge claims.

forms of 'adequately justified assent,' Klein arrives at the seemingly inescapable conclusion: the sceptical invalidation of *ordinary* belief cannot be defended because of its *extraordinary* notion of knowledge. Klein shows that modern epistemists have a wide arrange of reasonable theoretical alternatives up their sleeves in order to avoid the hyperbolic demands of sceptical doubt.<sup>2</sup>

In an even more outspoken fashion, Michael Williams insists on having definitively dismantled the threat of scepticism. Radical doubt, as employed by Cartesian sceptics (who claim "it is never correct to credit someone with knowing something about ordinary philosophical objects") as well as their Pyrrhonian predecessors (adhering to the idea that "no belief is justified even to the slightest degree") is merely "an artefact" of pre-modern philosophy, the by-product of an "out-dated" type of thought.<sup>3</sup> Williams argues that it is impossible to make actual sense of the sceptic's insistence that nothing can be known, as it hinges on the viability of a de-contextualised demand for certainty, a demand that ignores the "situational, disciplinary and other contextually variable factors" without which one cannot possibly specify what a valid answer would look like. In its wholesale rejection of human knowledge, scepticism meaninglessly rejects the context that could validate the doubt itself. Scepticism, according to Williams, presupposes the legitimacy of what is really an "unnatural" question, hence cannot be allowed to question our "ordinary epistemic practices."<sup>4</sup>

Having withstood the deceptive claims of scepticism, today's epistemists still bravely attempt to uncover what is the most adequate, most commonsensical theory of knowledge. Meanwhile, ordinary belief has proven quite capable of self-insulation. Scepticism is thus confined to the domain of epistemology, where it can help its non-sceptical counterparts "appreciate the problem we face" by rendering general doubt on cognitive adequacy, thereby sanctioning the need for a conceptual solution that has "maximal effectiveness in getting truth and blocking error."<sup>5</sup> What was once regarded the 'scandal of philosophy,' the ultimate intellectual challenge to overcome, now appears to having become a sitting duck; a pacified practicing target for the pragmatic analytic

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Klein, "Skepticism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/skepticism/>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Skepticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), xii.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Williams, "The Agrippan Argument and Two Forms of Skepticism," in *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 138.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Moser, "Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook to Epistemology*, ed. Paul Moser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 13.

intellect. Philosophers do not seem to fear this well-domesticated form of doubt anymore, even if it is occasionally allowed to show its argumentative claws in the opening chapters of our epistemology handbooks.

### **Stroud's semi-sceptical dissent**

Ironically though, philosophy's most vigorous proponents of cognitive correspondence do not seem particularly interested in finding out whether these sceptical stereotypes adequately express the views of the actual sceptics. Are there really any philosophers who doubt or deny the adequacy of our perceptual system in the context of ordinary life? Even Descartes does not quite qualify as a Cartesian sceptic of the sort that "contemporary philosophers still find interesting." He employed his scepticism for the clear methodological purpose of exposing the mistaken empiricist idea that scientific knowledge can be grounded in sense perception exclusively. Rather than rejecting knowledge in "many, if not all, domains" of ordinary thought, Descartes strove to *secure* knowledge of a *scientific* kind, by *provisionally* depriving *one subclass* of knowable things its de-contextualised validity by means of a *philosophical thought-experiment*. Yet even though their main opponent seems to be "made of straw,"<sup>6</sup> epistemists still proudly declare victory over external world scepticism.

In *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, Barry Stroud argues that the actual threat of Cartesian scepticism is a far subtler one. The problem revealed by Descartes is primarily one of *philosophical* justification, the issue being not whether we are entitled to entertaining ordinary belief, but whether it could be given a proper rational foundation. Stroud does not think we make an inconceivable move by hyperbolically falsifying all reasonable knowledge claims, and then demanding an objective account that explains why we *do* actually know these things. There is no fundamental distinction between the philosophical notion of 'objectivity' employed here, and the one we would use in ordinary life; for when we suppose to have knowledge:

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<sup>6</sup> Carolyn Black, "Review: Unnabtual Doubts," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54.3, 742.

What we (...) eventually claim to know is something that holds quite independently of our knowing it or of our being in a position reasonably to assert it. That is the very idea of objectivity.<sup>7</sup>

Thus our persistent inability to objectively answer Descartes' sceptical call cannot be without its consequences. The real sting of Cartesianism, the sceptical lesson Stroud argues we should take away, is that no epistemist should be granted his pragmatic anti-sceptical claims unless he can somehow explain what it means for *his* theory of knowledge to be *philosophically true* in any relevant sort of sense. In neither philosophy nor ordinary do we seem to possess an indisputable criterion for knowledge, warranting the conclusion that "we know nothing, (...) that nothing is certain, (...) that everything is open to doubt."<sup>8</sup> Left in his own daunting state of philosophical doubt, unable to find a reason to reject this apparently unattainable notion of objectivity, Stroud calls upon his readers to provide further diagnosis of the consequences of scepticism, of "*what the philosopher aspires to, and why he cannot reach it.*"<sup>9</sup>

Studying the sources of philosophical problems as they now present themselves to us can therefore perhaps be expected to yield some degree of understanding, illumination, satisfaction, or whatever it is we seek in philosophy, even if we never arrive at something we can regard as a solution to a philosophical problem. In fact the two might even work against each other; adopting something we take to be an acceptable answer to a philosophical problem might be just what prevents us from learning the lesson that a deeper understanding of the source of the problem could reveal.<sup>10</sup>

## **Two roads to radical scepticism**

Stroud adequately exposes philosophy's persistent inability to move beyond scepticism without thereby implicitly confirming the legitimacy of a more radical sort of doubt. One should not prematurely assume that ordinary thought is immune to critical scrutiny here, for Stroud might well be right in that "we are normally satisfied with less than (...)

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<sup>7</sup> Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) 78.

<sup>8</sup> Stroud, *The Significance*, vii.

<sup>9</sup> Stroud, *The Significance*, vii.

<sup>10</sup> Stroud, *The Significance*, x-xi.

the full conditions of knowledge” only because of the “practical social purposes” of ordinary belief.<sup>11</sup> At the end of his otherwise illuminating effort to determine the significance of philosophical scepticism, however, Stroud does not manage to arouse much intellectual urgency. For why should anyone really bother himself with such extravagant scenarios as the ‘the goldfinch in the garden’ being merely a dream?<sup>12</sup> If this is all that scepticism can do, it does not seem to be of much significance anyway.

In this essay, I demonstrate that Stroud could have made a much more persuasive case, had he not shared in the pernicious mistake of drawing his conclusions about scepticism exclusively from the methodological overture of Descartes’ otherwise non-sceptical philosophy. In order to bring out the real significance of philosophical doubt, in order to attain some actual insight into the nature of philosophical problems, I propose to redirect our attention away from Cartesian doubt altogether. Instead, I focus on a pair of philosophers who embrace a far more fundamental form of scepticism – challenging not the adequacy of perception but our very capacity to make any rational sense of the world whatsoever – and actually advocated it as *a way of life*. In fact, Stroud’s request for an analysis of “*what the philosopher aspires to, and why he cannot reach it*” perfectly coincides with the main question that Sextus Empiricus and Friedrich Nietzsche intended to answer.

Sextus and Nietzsche devote their attention not to the potential non-existence of goldfinches, but to the self-deceiving character of what is commonly perceived the impartial judging faculty in our truth-making process: the human intellect. They mean to expose the unsubstantiated preconceptions about human reason that philosophers have tacitly allowed to underlie their investigations. Their *Radical Scepticism* questions what it really means to reach a rational conclusion or be *right* about something. It questions the very purpose of asking philosophical questions, of attempting to find new answers or uncover new angles of incidence in order to cope with issues we cannot ever seem to agree on. It ultimately questions the validity of our very own thoughts; especially those considered rigorous enough to render something *certain* or *true*. According to Sextus and Nietzsche, rational inquiry must ultimately unveil the fickle nature of reason itself: what philosophers aspire to is a form of intellectual reassurance that is impossible to attain. Having exposed the incapacities of reason, they instead advocate a *practical way*

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<sup>11</sup> Stroud, *The Significance*, 203.

<sup>12</sup> Stroud, *The Significance*, 138.



out; whether or not we abandon our quest for knowledge, we'd better embrace the inherent uncertainty of human thought.

Notwithstanding their obvious heterogeneity, the philosophies of Sextus and Nietzsche seem to share the following sceptical characteristics:

- 1) Both emphasise the fine line that leads ordinary uncertainty into philosophical thinking: philosophy is conceived not as the perfection of human reason but as stemming from an unhealthy overestimation of it.
- 2) The pursuit of *ultimate* certainty is characterised as a dangerous activity, saddling the consistent philosopher with radical doubt; the sort of doubt that also devours our sense of *ordinary* certainty.
- 3) Both authors advocate their scepticism as a *therapy*, as an antidote, not to sceptical uncertainty itself, but to the unsubstantiated and untenable reverence of human reason that has caused us to disregard the *practical* values of thought. The sceptic's 'way of life' is characterised by a cheerful embracement of the *condition humaine*.
- 4) The authors do not regard their sceptical conclusions – or apparent self-refutation – as a problem, not even a philosophical one. They propound their philosophical arguments as argumentative tools that will self-dissolve in service of their therapeutic message.

### **Methodological remarks**

In the two chapters that follow, I examine the sceptical strategies of Sextus and Nietzsche along the abovementioned characteristics. I start off each account with the diagnosis propounded to explain what might have caused philosophy's sceptical problems, followed by some preliminary interpretative worries regarding the scope and viability of these arguments. Secondly, I emphasise the practical purpose of these sceptical philosophies, and show how the initial repercussions of rational doubt might be overcome. Lastly, I explain how the proposed philosophical therapy might be expected to work. Various interpretational hurdles will be crossed along the course of these two chapters, for the sake of which I will alternate somewhat audaciously between

different theoretical, practical and historical perspectives. My method could be regarded anti-analytical in an important respect, as interpretative decency must demand us to stop dehistoricising the thought-products of the diseased individuals we pretend to speak for – a form of intellectual injustice I cannot wish to remain untainted by either. Throughout the production of this essay I contracted a not-always-so-well-hidden distaste of the analytical text-mongering through which contemporary philosophy has sustained itself as a *rigorous* discipline. But I better leave such impertinent remarks to the final chapter, where I bring out the main point of this essay: that we should radically reconceptualise what we think is the nature of our philosophical problems. Perceived through the inverted lens of epistemology, scepticism will always appear as a worrisome anomaly in our body of knowledge. Yet one may as well accept sceptical uncertainty as the one *brute fact* – to use a particularly unfortunate expression – of existence. We may try and rationally resist the inevitable but that might come at the cost of much more than just our philosophical integrity...

## CHAPTER 1: SEXTUS EMPIRICUS

Pyrrhonian scepticism, Sextus Empiricus claims, is a philosophical school without a theory: its members will not accept any ultimate judgment as to the truth or falsehood of their beliefs. Hence when confronted with philosophical dispute, Pyrrhonists remain strictly non-aligned: their task consists of exposing the dogmatist's arguments, playing them out against each other, and ultimately expose their equipollence, their equal worthy- or unworthiness in regard to our assent. Confronted with this standoff, unable to resolve the issue in any way, the inquirer is thus forced to suspend judgment on the issue. Despite being entirely devoid of rational assurance, Sextus maintains that the Pyrrhonian sceptic can consistently achieve the very goal that his philosophical rivals fail to achieve: tranquillity in all argumentative matters. At the end of Sextus' philosophical therapy waits life without proper assent, during the course of which appearances are to be accepted for daily purposes and knowledge must be universally refrained from.

However charmingly put forward, Sextus' radical rejection of rational validity has never generated many adherents. At first sight, his sceptical conclusions seem unnecessarily pessimistic and potentially self-defeating. Given what appears to be the unmistakable advance of human knowledge, Pyrrhonism seems to invite – in the words of one particularly vocal anti-sceptical commentator – a “feeble and unnecessary surrender to despair, philistinism, cowardice or indolence.”<sup>13</sup> Sextus' existential aims are not without interpretational problems either, for even if it is possible to live life without proper belief, the sceptic seems obliged to doubt its very advisability.<sup>14</sup> Such objections, however, are symptomatic of the very idea Pyrrhonism means to cure away: that our beliefs *must* be justified theoretically, before they are to be accepted as a guide to life.

In this chapter, I bring out the exclusively *practical* nature of Sextus' therapeutic scepticism. Pyrrhonism advocates *a way of life* in a most radical sense. Its arguments are mere tools, employed not to establish an epistemic principle but to drive out the mistaken idea that we must have one. In section 1, I analyse these sceptical arguments.

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<sup>13</sup> Timothy Williamson, *The Philosophy of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 278.

<sup>14</sup> Gisella Striker, “Ataraxia: Happiness as tranquility,” in *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology*, ed. Striker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 187.

Pyrrhonism shares, or sponges on, the main principles underlying all ancient philosophy: that man is rationally obliged to establish what is true and false in order to find an acceptable *way of life* and attain tranquillity. On Sextus' analysis, however, none of his philosophical rivals manages to make good on these ideals: in the absence of a criterion of truth, we do not seem rationally justified to know anything at all. Section 2 is devoted to the practical consequences of the denial of truth. On the traditional interpretation, Pyrrhonists cannot coherently advocate their sceptical tranquillity, for one cannot seem to live without entertaining any proper beliefs. I argue that the Michael Frede's revisionist interpretation warrants our provisional assent, as scepticism does not demand the rejection of belief, but only our undogmatic practical acceptance of it. Nevertheless, Frede fails to explain why Sextus would actively advocate a life of existential uncertainty, instead of just keeping it for himself. In section 3, I provide a somewhat speculative account of the sceptical insight that positively justifies Pyrrhonism *as a way of life*. Through an intellectual catharsis, Sextus intends to cure his philosophical patients of their unsubstantiated aims: instead of perceiving existential uncertainty as an anomaly to overcome, *peace of mind* can be shown to result from a cheerful embracement of it.

## 1) DIAGNOSIS: WISDOM, PHILOSOPHY AND RATIONAL DESPAIR

Over the course of the last centuries, philosophy has gained acceptance as an academic discipline, championing the *rigorous analysis* of human thought as its main contribution to science. In this context, Pyrrhonian scepticism does not make immediate sense. For why would any self-respecting academic univocally reject all knowledge-claims, and settle for the out-dated aim of tranquillity on the basis of mere philosophical indecisiveness? Why not embrace human science for its reasonable degree of plausibility? Sextus-expert Jonathan Barnes formulates the main epistemological objection when he observes that “it is difficult to believe that Sextus ever seriously searched for the truth.”<sup>15</sup>

In this section, I argue that Sextus must have been searching for truth in quite a serious sense, as his philosophical quest for knowledge was undertaken for the existential sake of tranquillity. I first bring out what constitutes the core argument of Pyrrhonian scepticism: through his five modes, Sextus not only jeopardises our hopes of an epistemological theory, but also leaves the inquirer without even as much as a clue as to what could constitute rational thought. This would have immense ramifications on the ancient philosophical self-image. Through an analysis of the common preconceptions of philosophy as *a way of life*, as made intelligible by Pierre Hadot, I bring out what would have been a most daunting sceptical conclusion for antiquity’s ambitious inquirers. Instead of vitally perfecting the rational capacities of one’s thought, Sextus shows that philosophy must vitally damage our self-conception as intelligent human beings, thereby seemingly undermining all hopes for wisdom and tranquillity. While most contemporary philosophers have formally abandoned *peace of mind* as an aim, many implicitly subscribe to the very same ideas about the importance of knowledge for life: for why else would modern commentators so vigorously object that Pyrrhonism is “intolerable” as the endpoint of philosophy?<sup>16</sup> On Sextus’ sceptical analysis, however, rational inquiry cannot yield any other conclusion.

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<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Barnes, “Introduction: Sextus’ Life and Works,” in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, ed. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) xxx.

<sup>16</sup> e.g. Williams, “The Agrippan Argument,” 124.

## The problem of knowledge

Sextus' oeuvre consists of an immense amount of sceptical arguments, carefully devoted to the destruction of every existing form of philosophical-scientific inquiry. In *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, he explains what is to be the common core of Pyrrhonism; focusing his attack on ancient philosophy's three general sub-disciplines, (presently known as-) *ethics*, *metaphysics* and *epistemology*. For the inquirers of antiquity these disciplines were vitally interconnected. In order to answer philosophy's most nagging practical questions – what is the purpose of life? Which goals or actions are to be pursued? – the inquirer would first have to establish some essential metaphysical facts - Is anything good or bad by nature? Are we in control of our actions? Might there be any Gods? However, one would be confronted with many conflicting theories on these issues, all more or less convincingly propounded by different dogmatists on different dogmatic assumptions. In order to decide between these various ideas, one would first need to identify a criterion by which to weight the arguments. The crown jewels of philosophy must thus be buried somewhere in the subfield of epistemology.

Sextus here excavates philosophy's most fundamental problem; the problem of rational justification. In order to validate any sort of argument, one first needs to specify how truth or falsehood might be demonstrated. Sextus' sceptical strategy is most comprehensively effectuated through the *five modes*, a set of argumentative forms used to bring out the ultimate equipollence of all knowledge claims. John Fogelin divides these into two groups: the Challenging- and the Dialectical modes.<sup>17</sup> The former are to undermine our confidence in the actual existence of argumentative validity. In light of the unmistakable persistence of intellectual disagreement amongst philosophers, we cannot without argument assume that any one of them is correct; this would be the mode of *Discrepancy*. In fact, it is hard to see how any of our views could be regarded as *the correct one*, given the apparent fact that different ideas and perceptions appear differently to different animals and different individuals under different circumstances at different times; hence the mode of *Relativity*.

Philosophers usually resort to argument in order to resolve such epistemic challenges. However, once they enter into the sphere of rational justification, they

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<sup>17</sup> John Fogelin, "The Sceptics Are Coming! The Sceptics Are Coming!," in *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*, ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 122.

encounter the three *Dialectical* – or Agrippan – modes. One may simply provide a *foundational* criterion of truth without further explanation, but without an actual argument it would constitute a mere *Arbitrary Assumption*. However, any supporting argument would face the same objection; we cannot seem to end our inquiry unless some idea would miraculously validate itself. In order to avoid such *Infinite Regress* one can only resort to the mutual validating force of a certain set of ideas *taken together*, thereby falling prey to argumentative *Circularity*.

The five modes thereby establish what seems to be an insurmountable epistemological problem: in order to find a criterion of *truth and falsehood*, of *rational validity*, or even of what *reasonable assumption*, one would already need to possess a criterion of truth. Rational inquiry apparently warrants the conclusion that the *truth and falsehood simply cannot be rationally established*. Sextus, however, is well aware of the self-refuting nature of such claim, for:

(...) the very argument showing that there is not demonstration, since it is demonstrative, confirms that there is demonstration. (...) And if it is not a demonstration it is untrustworthy, while if it is a demonstration, there is demonstration.

On the other hand:

(...) if it is a demonstration, undoubtedly it has its premises and consequence true; for it is with the truth of these that demonstration is conceived. But its consequence is that there is no demonstration; therefore it is true that there is no demonstration, and its contradictory, that there is demonstration, is false.

Insurmountable philosophical uncertainty thus arises. By lack of a proper theoretical way to express the sceptical conclusion of Pyrrhonism - that philosophically speaking, nothing can be known, and not even that - Sextus resorts to the following statement:

Those matters investigated by the Dogmatists which I have considered appear such to me that none of them seems to me to exceed in convincingness or lack of convincingness what conflicts with it. (PH1 199)

## The problem of the external world

Pyrrhonism thus challenges all forms of justification whatsoever. Regardless of what is might be the source of our beliefs, we cannot seem to provide an argumentative strategy or a criterion on which to decide what is true and false, what is *really* the case and what is not. Since this means that no real rationally substantiated choice can be made with regarded to discrepancies in appearance and thought, Sextus indeed seems to doubt our knowledge “in many, if not all, domains in which we ordinarily think knowledge is possible.”<sup>18</sup> Most will intuitively side with Michael Williams here, he maintains that Pyrrhonism is intolerable: “because it implies that no belief is justifiable, even to the slightest degree.”<sup>19</sup> Philosophers have attempted to resolve this sceptical *scandal of philosophy* for many centuries now. Yet if Sextus’ mode of *Discrepancy* applies anywhere, it certainly applies here. Whether it be the Stoic idea of ‘clear and distinct’ impressions, Descartes’ God-argument, Hume’s epistemic naturalism,<sup>20</sup> Kant’s idealism, Moore’s Hand-argument or any of the modern epistemological theories of truth; philosophers simply cannot seem to agree on the *right* way to refute the sceptic. Williams himself underwrites the inescapable Pyrrhonism observation that are simply “too many solutions” to the problem of scepticism.<sup>21</sup>

As I have shown, Williams still thinks the problem can be reasonably overcome. Sextus cannot be allowed to doubt whether our beliefs are justified, for he thereby relies on a conception of knowledge that ignores the “situational, disciplinary and other contextually variable factors” we would need for answering it. Williams argues in favour of a form of *contextualism*, which allows the formation of ordinary knowledge on the basis of “epistemic responsibility and adequate grounding.”<sup>22</sup> Reasonable belief can thus be insulated from the groundless depths of Pyrrhonian doubt. Williams acknowledges that his preconception must come at the price of the very idea of

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<sup>18</sup> Klein, "Skepticism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/skepticism>.

<sup>19</sup> Williams, "The Agrippan Argument," 124.

<sup>20</sup> I think Hume could have never actually intended 'natural propensity' to be the criterion for truth, as that would be terribly naive given his general conformity to Pyrrhonism

<sup>21</sup> Williams, "Unnatural Doubts, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Williams, "The Agrippan Argument," 127.



philosophical knowledge itself: it “may not be all that philosophers have hoped for, but it has the distinct advantage of actually existing”.<sup>23</sup>

It is unclear, however, in what sense this argument would undermine Pyrrhonian scepticism, for Williams merely seems to reiterate its conclusion. Surely, we may be allowed our knowledge about the external world on the assumption that our ordinary views are already sufficiently justified, but what has been *proven* in this process? On the very same assumption, Peter Klein in fact designs yet another model of justification, allowing ordinary knowledge to be substantiated through an infinite series of increasingly refined philosophical arguments. Neither Klein nor Williams, however, explain why these answers to epistemic scepticism would be *true* in any relevant sort of sense, or which of our many ordinary beliefs would be true or false. They establish their defence on behalf of knowledge only by *redefining* what knowledge is. According to Sextus, such explanations:

(...) are useless – whether they are said to be accounts which, by brief reminder, lead us to a conception of the objects denoted by the phrases (...) or rather accounts that show what it is for something to be a certain thing, or what you will. For when they want to establish what a definition is, they fall into an indeterminable dispute. (PH2 211-2)

For Sextus, the *problem of definition* constitutes yet another form of sceptical uncertainty. One may allow contextualism to justify itself on contextual principles, and infinitism to validate itself through *Infinite Regress*, but that does not *solve* the problem of knowledge. One may as well argue that as a *meta-philosophical* account of knowledge, Sextus’ scepticism is only further corroborated, for Pyrrhonism can still be regarded as equally valid – or rather: invalid – as any of its non-sceptical counterparts. Hence:

for this reason even the person who seems to be contradicting us (...) is a help, and this very person anticipates us in constructing the position that ought to be constructed sceptically (M7 160)

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<sup>23</sup> Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, 22.

## Sextus' self-undermining meta-relativism

Opponents of Pyrrhonism should realise how exhaustively self-undermining it is to refute scepticism through rational debate. By arguing in favour of ordinary belief, one would only invite the question of what it would mean for ordinary belief, or for any sort of argument, to be true. Does a philosopher really solve *this* problem by giving some argument preference “*in point of convincingness or lack of convincingness*”(PH1.222)? In order for an argument to make any sense, we must somehow assume that its author is able to establish its convincingness, but how would one establish the convincingness of an argument if not on the basis of an agreed criterion for truth, or even plausibility? The only thing we *know* here is that there are:

many bearers of thought, and being many they are in disagreement, and being in disagreement they have need of that which judges upon them. This, then, is either thought again or something else over and above it. And it could not be thought; for being a part of the disagreement it will be in need of judgment and will no longer be a criterion. But if it is something else over and above it, it establishes the fact that thought is not the criterion. (M7 351)

In what sense exactly is an argument anything more than a thought arising in us, “*a human feeling which is apparent to the person who feels it*”? (PH1.202) The ultimate consequence of Pyrrhonian doubt is that it attacks the validity of our thinking itself. If philosophers wish, as they profess, “*not to babble like children,*” but “*distinguish truth and falsehoods by probative argument*” they should reveal to us their source of cognitive certainty (PH2.251). How may they “*decide dogmatically both that the form of the argument is conclusive and that the assumptions are true (or that these things are not the case*” (PH2.254)? In absence of an undisputed account of what constitutes philosophical correctness, we cannot seem to warrant any of the products of our intellect, for:

(...) if we were to imagine some people looking for gold in a dark room containing many valuables, it will happen that each of them, upon seizing one of the objects lying in the room, will believe that he has taken hold of the gold, yet none of them will be sure that he has encountered the gold – even if it turns out that he absolutely has encountered it. And so, too, into this universe, as into a large house, a crowd of philosophers has passed on the search for the truth, and the person who seizes it probably does not trust that he was on target. (M7 52)

## Philosophy as a way of life

However, despite his unmistakable insistence on non-assertion in all argumentative matters, Sextus does not refrain from clearly establishing the aim and “*final object of desire*” of his philosophy: “*tranquillity in matters of opinion and moderation of feelings in matters forced upon us*” (PH1 25). In order to see why he would allow himself such certainty, and in order to understand the source of his sceptical views, I first focus on the wider context in which Sextus stakes his sceptical claims.

In his ground-breaking analysis of ancient philosophy, Pierre Hadot argues that it was generally conceived as an activity of existential importance, aiming first and foremost at bringing about “a state of perfect peace of mind.” The ancient quest for knowledge, exercised through “philosophical discourse,” was thus undertaken in the wider context of what Hadot calls “philosophy itself.”<sup>24</sup> Through their love for wisdom, philosophers would allow themselves a “wide and deep experience of human life and insights into its problems,” to transcend their ordinary state of mind and instead obtain a comprehensive view of the ultimate nature of reality.<sup>25</sup> At the end of their intellectual journey awaited an exceptional form of wisdom, an “elevation of thought, passing from individual and impassioned subjectivity to the objectivity of the universal perspective, that is to say, to the exercise of pure thought.”<sup>26</sup> That is not to say, however, that philosophy was regarded a purely spiritual exercise. In *Pursuits of Wisdom*, John Cooper argues that Hadot did somewhat disregard the extent to which philosophy was a rational practice. While the common folk were driven by passion and fear, philosophy was to cultivate human reason as “the soul’s ultimate authority,” yielding a rationally well-balanced, tranquil *way of life*.<sup>27</sup>

## The ‘causal principle’ of philosophy

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew Sharpe, “Pierre Hadot (1922-2010),” in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/hadot/#H4>.

<sup>25</sup> John Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) 1.

<sup>26</sup> Sharpe, “Pierre Hadot, #H4.

<sup>27</sup> Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom*, 11.

In order to attain "*tranquillity in matters of opinion and moderation of feelings in matters forced upon us,*" however, Sextus' Hellenistic contemporaries first had to rid themselves of the many philosophical, theological and scientific controversies of their time, the very mistake that would drive the sceptic into sceptical despair:

The causal principle of scepticism we say is the hope of becoming tranquil. Men of talent, troubled by the anomaly in things and puzzled as to which of them they should rather assent to, came to investigate what in things is true and what false, thinking that by deciding these issues they would become tranquil. (PHI 12)

In this passage, Sextus explicitly appeals to the Stoics' philosophical starting points. Through rational inquiry into the real nature of reality, Stoics would rid themselves of ordinary passions and existential disturbance – which they thought arises when false impressions are being assented to – and bring their action and thought into perfect agreement with nature, which was itself regarded an intelligent well-ordered system with divine properties. The Stoics would thus literally investigate what "in things is true and what false" in order to become tranquil. In a loose sense, however, the above description also applies to the Epicureans, who rather conceived of the universe as a meaningless material entity, consisting only of atoms and void. Epicureans were to free themselves of any ensuing worries by embracing "the simple joy of existing." In this sense, then, Sextus apparently leaves untouched the philosophical starting points of his time, starting his sceptical analysis from common ground. Yet in light of this widely shared world view, one may imagine how immensely troubling it must have been to find out that the actual practice of rational inquiry does not seem to provide any certainty as to truth and falsehood at all.

### **Philosophy, truth and tranquillity**

Now, one might not feel overly troubled by Sextus' radical self-defeat. In fact, it seems that a certain form of philosophical scepticism has become widely accepted amongst philosophers. In academic circles, hardly anyone seems to pursue, ultimate truth anymore and many would agree with Sextus that no complete rational reassurance should ever be expected for any of our views. On antiquity's conception of philosophy,

however, the situation would be markedly different. By developing the intellect, philosophers would familiarise themselves with the true fabric of reality and liberate themselves from irrationality, ignorance and unnecessary suffering of ordinary existence. In an age of political turmoil, with science and medicine at an uncertain and rather speculative stage and an incredibly complicated pantheon of paranoid Greco-Roman Gods to adhere to, Sextus' destructive reminder of our intellectual incompetencies must have been particularly daunting for the Hellenist proto-sceptic. Philosophy was meant to endow its practitioners with epistemic reassurance as to the real nature of things, allowing tranquillity and wisdom to arise; yet rational discourse seems to unveil an even more unavoidable source of uncertainty. For even if we were to assume that some actions are good and others bad we cannot seem to identify them. It seems beyond the individual to prove whether or not there are any Gods, whether or not we are free to act, and which of our often-anomalous sense-impressions actually represent reality. The problem of scepticism is first and foremost a problem of knowledge, for the ancients it was an actual problem of life, for:

“that there is an order of life which has been articulated in a determined manner by way of skilled reasoning seems rather like a pious wish.” (M11 208)

Worse even, the Pyrrhonist cannot seem to provide himself with any sort of rational certainty anymore. For he cannot seem to assent to Pyrrhonism without falling into rational self-refutation, as well as he cannot seem to avoid self-refutation if he rejects the sceptical conclusion of his philosophical inquiry.

## 2) SCEPTICISM AS THERAPY: IS SEXTUS A QUACK?

If Sextus' analysis is adequate, philosophy uncovers a fatal flaw in the intellect as a source of knowledge. The Pyrrhonian sceptic not only deprives himself of philosophical certainty, but also invalidates any ordinary belief. In contrast to almost all of his contemporaries, Sextus actually argues that we should embrace this existential uncertainty as the unavoidable outcome of intellectual inquiry. However, by suspending judgment the sceptic would manage to obtain tranquillity anyway. Sextus argues that his dogmatic opponents are the one's "perpetually troubled," as they persist to chase after the objects of their dubitable ideas. Pyrrhonists abandon any such belief, thereby curing themselves of the main source of their anxiety.

All along antiquity and onwards again from its rediscovery in the modern era, Pyrrhonian scepticism has been ridiculed for advocating his sceptical lifestyle. According to David Hume, the Pyrrhonist:

must acknowledge, if he will acknowledge anything, that all human life must perish, were his principles universally and steadily to prevail. All discourse, all action would immediately cease; and men remain in a total lethargy, till the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence (Hume, *Enquiry* 12.23)

The perplexity here seems to be twofold: firstly, why should a sceptic even accept his own sceptical principles; secondly, how could one live a life of rational paralysis? According to what has come to be the 'traditional interpretation,' the necessities of life must ultimately betray Sextus' sceptical philosophy. In this section, I examine these worries. I will argue that the dominant 'rustic' reading of Pyrrhonism, as advocated by Jonathan Barnes and Myles Burnyeat, attributes to Sextus the very sort of dogmatic deductions that he meant to renounce. Any interpretation should take seriously Sextus' own insistence on the primacy of ordinary life. I will provisionally endorse Michael Frede's revisionist reading, yet expose some of its shortcomings, as it fails to coherently explain the interplay between suspension and tranquillity.

### **The terrible life of rustic scepticism**

Living without belief might not seem possible, yet early in the *Outlines* Sextus professes to commit himself to it, for “(t)he chief constitutive principle of Skepticism is the claim that to every account an equal account is opposed; for it is from this, we think, that we come to hold no beliefs” (PH1 12). In the subsequent passage, he elucidates:

When we say that Sceptics do not hold beliefs, we do not take ‘belief’ in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that belief is acquiescing in something; for Sceptics assent to the feelings forced upon them by appearances—for example, they would not say, when heated or chilled, ‘I think I am not heated (or: chilled)’. Rather, we say that they do not hold beliefs in the sense in which some say that belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences; for Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything unclear. (PH1 13)

According to Barnes and Burnyeat, Sextus here condemns himself to living by appearance. In Sextus work, the term ‘appearance,’ does not merely signify our sense-impressions but also the thoughts that naturally appear to the intellect.<sup>28</sup> Sextus must *acquiesce* in these, as he cannot possibly deny being affected in such-and-such a way. But he cannot properly give his *assent* either. Identifying which of the appearances correctly represent the actual world necessitates rational investigation, on which basis no reliable belief can seem to be formed. As a consequence of his sceptical stance, Sextus must conclude that “all belief is unreasonable precisely because (...) all belief concerns real existence as opposed to appearance:” only his dogmatic opponents would claim to know whether existing things are such as they appear.<sup>29</sup> As such, Sextus commits himself to suspension of judgment in every aspect of ordinary life. If he really means to live his rational relativism, he must apply suspension of judgment *tout-court*; he is sceptically obliged to *unpersuade* himself of every single assumption regarding the real nature of things, and live life *adoxastos*, without belief.

But, Barnes asks, how could a Pyrrhonist survive on the basis of this self-inflicted mental incapacitation? He imagines a situation where the Pyrrhonist, standing next to a stove and finds himself utterly incapable of deciding whether the water in the kettle might be expected to boil.<sup>30</sup> The science of thermostatics, by means of its impressions on the intellect, might seem to suggest the existence of a correlation between the rising of

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<sup>28</sup> Myles Burnyeat, “Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?,” in *The Original Sceptics*, ed. Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), 32.

<sup>29</sup> Burnyeat, “Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?,” 19.

<sup>30</sup> Barnes, “Introduction,” xxv.

what some call 'temperature' and the nearby manifestation of what is said to be 'heat'; the eyes might reveal some familiar bubbly events taking place in the kettle; the nerve system, if we would even assume that it exists, might be thought to transmit a sensation of agonizing pain when empirical contact with the particular occurrence is established; yet the Pyrrhonist must yield to his "helpless inability" to make a decision on this matter. Burnyeat argues that if belief is the 'acceptance of something as true', Sextus cannot have any. Rather, he must have his cake and eat it: if his Pyrrhonian arguments are to make sense, he should not allow himself to insulate even the slightest bit of ordinary belief. In order to consistently suspend judgment, Sextus must disallow himself the rational capacity to judge, thereby fatally undermining his own decision-making process: without any belief to act on, the sceptic's life cannot seem to contain any action at all.<sup>31</sup>

Given its impossible practical consequences; it does not even seem possible to seriously consider Pyrrhonism as a way of life. And even if we grant that tranquillity could somehow accompany the terrifying life of inactivity, how could we pursue it without secretly holding opinions on how things are? Burnyeat argues that Sextus cannot even suspend judgment without tacitly assenting to its argumentative *impression* of validity. If the Pyrrhonist wants to make any sense, he must embrace the conclusions of his scepticism. But then, the *Acquiescence* in his own thought-impressions must involve the acceptance of a belief after all. Thus Sextus cannot intelligibly defend his philosophy as a proper way of life: he must either give up all belief, miss the causation of tranquillity and perish in eternal anxiety, or positively embrace his sceptical assumptions about tranquillity at the cost of self-refutation.

### **A revisionist interpretation**

The traditional interpretation, I think, is fundamentally mistaken. Sextus repeatedly insists that his philosophy "is not *opposed to ordinary life*" (PH1 25): and it is clear why he didn't. Despite his insistence on argumentative equipollence, Sextus never fully embraces even his own argumentative conclusions. Radically renouncing ordinary life on the basis of opinions would be a most daunting display of the "*dogmatic affliction of*

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<sup>31</sup> Barnes, "Introduction," xxiv



*conceit*" (3.281). On the contrary, when ordinary occurrences are challenged by ancient sophistry, Sextus objects that we should not assent to the arguments! For,

(i)f there is an argument leading us to something agreed to be absurd, we do not assent to the absurdity because of the argument – rather, we abandon the argument because of the absurdity (PH2 251)

The traditional interpretation attributes to Sextus exactly the sort of absurdity he wished to challenge. Pyrrhonism as a philosophy that is meant to “*show how it is possible to live*” (PH1.17), even in light of its radical relativism. In fact it seems essential for Sextus to radically NOT renounce anything. His philosophy would not make much sense as an alternative to the dogmatist’s way of life if it did not convincingly yield the self-proclaimed aims of tranquillity and moderation.

Similar considerations have led Michael Frede to challenge the traditional view. Yet he accepts its main point: a Pyrrhonist must accept more than mere appearance in order to live, and if his thinking does not concern what is the case in the world, he cannot be said to have any beliefs at all.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Frede argues, passage PH1.13 must allow some belief as to how things are. Sextus explains that the sceptic can still entertain beliefs in the sense of *acquiescence* in the appearances. This does not consist in the epistemic acceptance of the occurrence of an impression, as the traditionalists explain, but in a cautious acceptance of its content. Hence “What the sceptic literally accepts, what he is content with, what he has no objection to is whatever seems to him to be the case.”<sup>33</sup> The sceptic is allowed his views on how things are, but should reject only belief on how things *really* are, on what is the ultimate nature of things. External world scepticism relies on precisely such ultimate views: they constitute the absurdities stemming from having firm convictions about some ‘unclear objects of investigation in the sciences.’ As long as we cannot identify any rational standards by which to judge ultimate truth, Sextus will not fully assent to any unclear argumentative views but instead acquiesces in one should not expect to meet the demand for rigorous philosophical explanation: the ‘plain experience’ of senses and thought.<sup>34</sup> On this revisionist view, Sextus’ scepticism is entirely ‘urbane:’ the sceptic cures himself of

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<sup>32</sup> Frede, “The Sceptic’s Beliefs,” 9.

<sup>33</sup> Frede, “The Sceptic’s Beliefs,” 15.

<sup>34</sup> Frede, “The Sceptic’s Beliefs,” 17.

philosophical melancholy by entertaining no firm philosophical thoughts, instead embracing the inherent uncertainty of his world-view.

### **Interpretational uncertainty**

Casey Perin, however, argues that both the aforementioned interpretations of passage PH1.13 are incorrect. Against the traditional interpretation, she argues that the distinction Sextus aims at cannot be about belief and non-belief; Sextus clearly allows some sceptical belief, which is only of a different sense than its dogmatic alternative. Yet she agrees with Burnyeat that Frede is wrong to establish this difference on the basis of Sextus' solitary reference to the sciences. Instead, she argues, he means to distinguish between beliefs that 'evident' and 'non-evident.' Evident belief is signified in this passage not by its non-dogmatic content but by its direct epistemic status: Perin argues that the sceptic assents to and has knowledge of his own *pathê*;<sup>35</sup> he apprehends only his "*direct feelings of sense and thought*" (PH1 215). Something evident can be uncritically accepted, as "is known without being known on the basis of, or as a result of, an inference from something else that is known. In contrast, something is non-evident if and only if it is known, if it is known at all, as the result of an inference from something else that is known."<sup>36</sup> By accepting evident belief, the sceptic accepts the state he is in: courtesy of his direct access, it is evident to the sceptic, he knows, that "that it appears to him that honey is sweet".<sup>37</sup>

This, however, would invoke some daunting traditional objections to Pyrrhonian life: for on Perin's interpretation, Sextus cannot seem to have any additional thoughts about anything, hence must rely only on his primary thoughts and feelings. But how can a sceptic actually distinguish the evident from the non-evident? How can his suspension of judgment be accounted for, given that it must now be conceived as an evident impression, as a direct affect of opinion? On this interpretation, Sextus seems to betray his own principle of philosophical non-assertion when he adopts his sceptical framework, leaving completely unaccounted for why he would be allowed to claim that

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<sup>35</sup> Casey Perin, "Scepticism and Belief," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 159.

<sup>36</sup> Perin, "Scepticism and Belief," 158.

<sup>37</sup> Perin, "Scepticism and Belief," 161.

*“the matters investigated by the dogmatists are of such a nature as to be inapprehensible”* (PH1 200).

In light of this, it seems quite impossible to account for Sextus’ apparent argumentative inconsistencies. According to Barnes, we should not even aim at a coherent interpretation of Pyrrhonism, as it is impossible to “iron out” his frivolous *Outlines* in favour of any view.<sup>38</sup> Sextus indeed repeatedly warns his readers not to take his exact articulation of Pyrrhonism too seriously: for Pyrrhonists:

do not use the phrases strictly [i.e. making clear the objects to which they are applied] but indifferently and, if you like, in a loose sense – for it is unbecoming for a Sceptic to fight over phrases. (PH1 207)

Which explains why Sextus employs a confusing amount of different phrases to ventilate his sceptical beliefs: These apply only *“relatively to the sceptic,”* it merely reports what is *“apparent to us,”* sceptics do not make *“firm assertions”* about *“anything unclear”* or about *“the nature of externally existing things”* (PH1 208, PH2 10), the sceptic *“cannot apprehend anything unclear or make firm assertions about it”* (PH2 10), he does not hold *“assertions with firm conviction”* (PH1 18) or argues *“without holding opinions”* (PH1 24). Now in light of Sextus’ radical relativism, in light of his persistent objection to all philosophical criteria, rational arguments and interpretative frameworks, it would be surprising if ‘rigorous’ philological exegesis would ever uncover a theoretical framework by which one may distinguish the exact beliefs a Pyrrhonian can still adhere to.

Yet that does not mean that Sextus’ words carry no meaning, for he clearly intends them to have a medicinal function and work as a purgative drug (PH1 206). According to Katja Vogt, the passage in question could better be assessed by their rhetorical role, as another argumentative arrow, aimed at the Stoics.<sup>39</sup> The sort of *acquiescence* that Sextus signifies here would indeed apply to the involuntary affections of *appearance*. As such, the sceptic is forced to assent. According to Vogt this forced assent takes place when we experience hunger, which naturally moves us to eat by *“necessitating our assent”*. This, Vogt argues, must have been a sort of pun on Stoic action theory, as it defines as the two essential ingredients of ‘assent’ that it is ‘in our

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<sup>38</sup> Barnes, “Introduction,” xxiii.

<sup>39</sup> Katja Vogt, “Scepticism and Action,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 174.

power', and that it involves "the establishment of something as true."<sup>40</sup> The notion of *forced assent* involved in Sextus' nondogmatic avowals would be nonsensical from a Stoic point of view. Instead of taking Sextus' phrasing as an indication of a viable criterion, Vogt thinks we should interpret the passage in an everyday sense, indicating that the Stoic assents to what he happens to think without worrying about its exact philosophical consequences.<sup>41</sup>

### **Frede's revisionism**

This explanation in fact suits Frede's original revisionism. Frede did not seem to aim at an impeccable exegesis of the *Outlines*, but instead captures its overall spirit. Given Sextus' deep-rooted distrust of reason, it would not make sense to firmly assent to any of his views. Yet while the employment of reason in philosophical dispute cannot but induce existential doubt, the sceptic still finds himself confronted with the same old cognitive system: unfounded as they might ultimately be, the sceptic cannot but provisionally accept the fallibilities that appear to his cognitive system. Sextus still entertains beliefs, but only in so far that it 'seems to be the case that things are so and so'.<sup>42</sup> The change in sceptical life, Frede explains, is situated not in the content of his beliefs, but in his attitude towards them.<sup>43</sup> Vogt agrees: in addition to his suspension on theoretical matters, the recovered philosopher overcomes his doubt only at the cost of his resoluteness: he re-enters the realm of ordinary life with "an oddly uncommitted adherence to the way people ordinarily do things"<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Vogt, "Scepticism and Action," 174.

<sup>41</sup> Vogt, "Scepticism and Action," 178.

<sup>42</sup> Frede, "The Sceptic's Beliefs," 9.

<sup>43</sup> Frede, "The Sceptic's Beliefs," 23.

<sup>44</sup> Vogt, "Scepticism and Action," 178.

### 3) TREATMENT: A CATHARSIS OF THOUGHT

Even if the traditional account of Pyrrhonism is mistaken, it raises some interesting objections. Most importantly, it remains unclear in what sense Pyrrhonism provides a remedy for our philosophical worries about knowledge. Why should we assume that in ordinary life, the suspension of judgment produces tranquillity rather than “acute anxiety?”<sup>45</sup> If Pyrrhonism is to provide a therapy, it should at least be able to account for its potential benefits; but how could tranquillity and moderation be advocated if not by means of philosophical assumptions about what constitutes the right *way of life*? Shouldn't Sextus feel at some sceptical pull towards the non-endorsement of these goals?<sup>46</sup> At this point, Barnes seems right to conclude that even if the revisionist account is correct, “Dr Sextus lets me leave the surgery in the very state of uncertainty that induced me to enter it. He is a quack.”<sup>47</sup>

In this last section, I argue that the Pyrrhonist's state of mind should not be interpreted too narrowly, as a mere submission to blissful ignorance, but rather as a philosophical conversion to non-contemplative practical *wisdom*. I first speculate on what Sextus calls the *fortuitous discovery* of sceptical tranquillity – an event that must have involved some sort of intellectual catharsis – and then emphasise the radically anti-theoretical nature of his therapeutic methodology. One should not expect Pyrrhonism to meet the traditionalist demand for rigorous rational explanation, for it ultimately aims at the very embracement of its own sceptical self-defeat. If Pyrrhonism is to make sense as a practice, as a *way of life*, it must thus allow itself its aporetic nature.

#### Unexpectedly encountering tranquillity

The discovery of tranquillity, Sextus recounts, was a lucky coincidence. Presumably indeed, a proto-sceptic cannot imagine beforehand how it could come about exactly. Instead, he must stubbornly persist in his philosophical quest, expecting to achieve tranquillity through rational self-realisation even in light of his repeated failure to grasp

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<sup>45</sup> Burnyeat, “Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?,” 51.

<sup>46</sup> Striker, “Ataraxia,” 189.

<sup>47</sup> Barnes, “Introduction,” xxxi.

the ultimate order of life; the idea would only be strengthened by the increased intellectual insecurity accompanying rational failure. I assume from Sextus' own analogy (later below) that his sceptical insight must have resulted from an eruption of despair, stemming perhaps from an ultimate philosophical effort to formulate an Archimedean fix somewhere in his own cognitive system. At some point though, reason must have finally outmanoeuvred its own rear-guard to deal itself an irreparable blow. David Hume must have experienced exactly this full-fledged philosophical self-defeat at the end of the *Treatise*:

I have expos'd myself to the enmity of all metaphysicians, logicians, mathematicians, and even theologians; and can I wonder at the insults I must suffer? I have declar'd my disapprobation of their systems; and can I be surpriz'd, if they shou'd express a hatred of mine and of my person? When I look abroad, I foresee on every side, dispute, contradiction, anger, calumny and detraction. When I turn my eye inward, I find nothing but doubt and ignorance. All the world conspires to oppose and contradict me; tho' such is my weakness, that I feel all my opinions loosen and fall of themselves (Hume, *Treatise* 1.4.7.2)

At this point any non-academic bystander, witnessing whatever might have been the perceptible symptoms of intellectual squalor, would propose to take a much needed break and forget about philosophy for a minute. It did seem to work for Hume, who overcame his epistemic crisis by indulging into some worldly affairs and (temporarily) accepted his contemplative fate. After a while, he reports, his former speculations look "so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther" (Hume, T1.4.7.9).

Ironically, Hume seems to have experienced exactly the sort of intellectual catharsis that could constitute the envisioned Pyrrhonian turnabout. Alleviation of his epistemic worries did not, as assumed before, come about in some rationally substantiated way; it instead followed unexpectedly from a moment of ultimate intellectual despair. Tranquillity as to his former philosophical speculations resulted from seeing the fruitlessness of his endeavours. The aim of philosophy was thus achieved "*fortuitously*" (PH1 25), in a way analogous to the story of the painter Appelles, who:

(w)anted to represent in his picture the foam on the horse's mouth; but he was so unsuccessful that he gave up, took the sponge on which he had been wiping off the colours from his brush, and flung it at the picture. And when it hit the picture, it produced a representation of the horse's foam. (PH1 27)

Despite being devoid of any absolute answers to the questions of life, despite being without a shred of proper rational reassurance, the sceptic finds himself, as Hume says, "absolutely and necessarily determined to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life" (E 1.7.3). Having fallen down the imaginary stairs to sagehood, the sceptic thus returns to ordinary existence with no further dreams of pure knowledge. The existential ideas of ancient philosophy clearly still had some influence on Hume, when he says that

But notwithstanding that my natural propensity, and the course of my animal spirits and passions reduce me to this indolent belief in the general maxims of the world, I still feel such remains of my former disposition, that I am ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire, and resolve never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy. (T 1.4.7.10)

Compare that with the following poem, cited by Sextus in (M11 172):

Someone said lamenting, as mortals do lament  
'Alas, what am I to suffer? What wisdom is to be born in me know?  
As to my mind I am a beggar, there is not a grain of sense in me.  
In vain I expect to escape sheer destruction.  
Three and four times blessed, though, are those who have nothing  
And who have not eaten up at leisure what they grew to ripeness.  
Now I am fated to be overcome by wretched strife  
And poverty and whatever else chases mortal drones.'

### **Pyrrhonian revelation**

Given the "*pointless hardship*" that had accompanied his wretched philosophical strife (M11 172), the obtainment of tranquillity must have felt like an achievement of epic proportions: it afforded the Pyrrhonist privileged access to precisely the sort of

philosophical calmness that he and his contemporaries had always aimed at. Philosophy did in fact ignite in him what the Stoics call a “*skill relating to life*” (M11 170), as the sceptic suddenly finds himself able to bear any existential uncertainty overcoming him. Instead of determining the ultimate philosophical good, Sextus now appreciates his ordinary preferences in a calm and moderate manner, fostering a plain and cheerful acceptance of regular life. Pyrrhonism does not prescribe any beliefs, not about the right conduct of life, not about the ultimate nature of things, not about “*whether anything (...) is generally to be done*” (PH3 204). Its practitioners do not disturb themselves philosophically by formulating any overly ambitious ideas about any life-fulfilling state of mind.

But Sextus nowhere imitates the dogmatist’s “*big solemn boast*” of eternal wisdom (M7 27). He often ridicules the dogmatists’ pretentious claims to wisdom and refuses to couch his conversion in their terms of sagehood. Having flooded his soul with rational self-refutation, Sextus cannot seem to take his own thinking too seriously anymore. That seems to constitute somewhat of an anomaly. I think Burnyeat is right when he argues that Sextus seems to experience a peculiar sort of self-defeat, as he comes to think of his own views as something that ‘is thought within me (...) but I do not believe it.’<sup>48</sup> Sextus chooses not to make any “*firm assertions*” anymore, but instead accepts his opinions “*without strong inclination or adherence (as a boy is said to go along with his chaperon)*” (PH1 230). Thomas Nagel articulates well the sort of sceptical attitude it could involve:

We return to our familiar convictions with a certain irony and resignation. (...) we take them back, like a spouse who has run off with someone and then decided to return; but we regard them differently (Nagel, *The Absurd*, 19-20)

Sextus cannot but accept the radical contingency of his own thinking. Yet only an ancient dogmatist would think this to yield a degenerate life, and only through the acceptance of some inherently disputed philosophical theory of action could one argue that Pyrrhonian life is a life of inactivity. For although Sextus often speaks of his beliefs as unavoidable occurrences, he objects to the idea that they would somehow directly steer his actions. Vogt argues that we should not think of sceptical action as inherently random. But since they are based in beliefs that could have been otherwise, the actions

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<sup>48</sup> Burnyeat, “Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?,” 230.



could also have been otherwise; what seems to the sceptic as the 'right' thing to do is entirely contingent.<sup>49</sup> Early in the *Outlines*, Sextus provides an adequate but non-exhaustive list of the many factors that he nevertheless still allows to influence his daily decisions in an undogmatic way: basic sense-perception and reasoning, unavoidable inclinations such as hunger and thirst, the preconceptions he has based on the laws and customs he grew up with, and the teachings of expertise (PH1 23-4). From the perspective of an ancient philosopher, the most prominent influencing mechanism is the rational-philosophical "skill relating to life" that a wise man would normally advocate.

Yet, Richard Bett argues, some of Sextus' decisions cannot be made in such a mundane non-philosophical way. For how would Sextus ever cope with the many profound ethical choices of ordinary life? Can a sceptic profess to be an ethical agent, or should we regard him an unaffected nihilist, merely aiming at his own state of tranquillity?<sup>50</sup> In passage M11.164 Sextus elucidates. Here he explains how a sceptic would react when a tyrant threatens his life and forces him to perform some 'unspeakable deed.' Now if the sceptic did not care about ethical speakability whatsoever, the choice would not seem so hard. At first sight, Sextus comes across somewhat heartlessly when he says that "*he will choose one thing, perhaps, and avoid the other by the preconception which accords with his ancestral laws and customs*" (M11 166). However, if the Pyrrhonist were supposed to be an ethical nihilist, or a mindless conventionalist, this would be the time for Sextus to announce it. But rather than claiming that the outcome cannot really matter to him, Sextus indicates that even a sceptic cannot remain unmoved: he may realise that his ethical abhorrence or his fear of death could be entirely contingent, but he can and would not therefore wish it away. Instead "*he will bear the harsh situation more easily compared to the dogmatist, because he does not (...) have any further opinion over and above these conditions*" (M11 166). In order for this passage to make sense we must expect the Pyrrhonist to be quite disturbed by the impossible ethical choice forced upon him. While Sextus may not be quite able to account for his ethical beliefs, one need not presume that he must therefore resort to completely moral nihilism: only a dogmatist would require himself to adopt such extraordinary rationalist stance.

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<sup>49</sup> Vogt, "Scepticism and Action," 175.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Bett, "Scepticism and Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 191.

## Pyrrhonian philosophy as a medicinal device

Yet there is still a considerable objection left. We may allow Sextus to enjoy his own tranquil state of mind and make his ethical decisions, but why should he think that others could benefit from his Pyrrhonian principles as well? Striker thinks he should not have advocated tranquillity and moderation as his philosophical aims, as they cannot but have an exclusively non-evident background. The objection seems especially applicable to the following claim:

(...) those who hold the opinion that things are good or bad by nature are perpetually troubled. When they lack what they believe to be good, they take themselves to be persecuted by natural evils (...) and when they have acquired these things, they experience more troubles; for they are elated beyond reason and measure, and in fear of change they do anything so as not to lose what they believe to be good. (PH1 27)

Why should Sextus allow himself such a grandiose philosophical exception here? Doesn't he display exactly the sort of dogmatic thinking he claims to be cured from?

The apparent controversy can only be accounted for by bringing out the futility of demanding a consistent epistemic answer. In fact, the while point of Pyrrhonism is that we should stop facilitating the demands of reason, and embrace the fact that the above claim can always be challenged philosophically. Rather than measuring the merits of Sextus' scepticism by the argumentative standards it has shown the impossibility of, we should examine its adequacy as a *way of life*. Sextus started his own philosophical school because "*(s)ceptics are philanthropic and wish to cure by arguments, as far as they can, the conceit and rashness of the dogmatists*" (PH3 280). He explains that Pyrrhonism is not a philosophical school in the normal sense, with a set of beliefs "*which cohere both with one another and with what is apparent*" (PH1 16). Rather, it should be conceived as persuasion, "*a choice of life or of a way of acting practiced by a person*" (PH1 145). The most important property of Pyrrhonism, I agree with Striker, is the "attitude to philosophical problems and theses" that is shared by its members.<sup>51</sup> Theoretically speaking the attitude is being "*at a loss*" as to what to accept: the 'sceptic' or 'careful examiner' does not allow himself any firm yet unfounded belief about the true nature of things, hence remains ignorant with regard to the bigger questions of life. Yet by driving

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<sup>51</sup> Gisella Striker, "Skepticism as a Way of Life", *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 83, 114.

himself to philosophical despair the sceptic has obtained a practical insight that seems to him of great value: against all general expectations of ancient philosophy, he obtained his long-anticipated attitude of tranquillity not by the attainment of philosophical knowledge but by recognising its practical redundancy.

Now as a philosopher in the narrow sense, as a practitioner of ‘philosophical discourse,’ Sextus cannot affirm or deny whether his state of tranquillity should be conceived as the ultimate goal of life; and he cannot philosophically convince himself that he has an ethical obligation to help his fellow-philosophers here. Yet as an undogmatic philanthropic individual – who also happens to be a doctor – Sextus recognises in others the symptoms of the “*dogmatic affliction of conceit*” he himself once suffered from. Many of his ‘truth-loving’ fellow-animals still embark on their philosophical quests in order to answer the bigger questions of life. “*Men of talent*” are still tempted to transcend the struggle of ordinary life by making good on their rational prowess. Philosophy as a way of life was still regarded an intellectual journey, through which one could shape an intellectual “skill relating to life.” Dogmatist schools still “*snare the young with vain hopes*” of ultimate knowledge, which was still expected to result in wisdom and tranquillity (M11 171). The Pyrrhonist need not actually have to convince himself of the universal advisability of his cure, for there was in fact a huge social demand for tranquillity.

But Pyrrhonism fashions itself a distinctly practical methodological framework. Hadot’s distinction between ‘philosophical discourse’ and ‘philosophy itself’ is particularly helpful here. Since human beings seem to have a pathological need for existential certainty, Pyrrhonists not only accept tranquillity as an alternative state of mind, but also practice philosophical argument in order to bring it about. Their philosophical counterparts still adhere to the unsubstantiated assumption that tranquillity of mind can only arise through the attainment of knowledge, which was to be the result of rigorous rational argument: these arguments in turn were to justify the world view underlying the mission statements of ‘Philosophy itself’. In that sense, dogmatist philosophy mirrored ancient Rationalist medicine. When treating their patients, Rationalist doctors relied on – what could well be regarded wildly speculative – metaphysical principles to find what they thought must be the ‘hidden cause’ of the disease. Empiricist doctors on the other hand abstained from all deductive reasoning, choosing instead to rely on past perceptual observations exclusively. Quite analogously

to those practicing Pyrrhonism, medical *Methodists* refused to take a methodological side in this debate, preferring instead to work on an exclusively practical basis. They used to state that “the disease in itself is indicative of its treatment,” thereby objecting to the idea that a doctor had to subscribe to a sophisticated set of methodological principles in order to justify his treatments. Like Pyrrhonists, Methodists professed to follow “*what seems to be expedient*” without making any fundamental claims about their work.<sup>52</sup> Methodist medicine exemplifies its Pyrrhonian counterpart for

(...) this alone of the medical schools seems to practice no rashness in unclear matters and does not presume to say whether they are apprehensible or inapprehensible, but it follows what is apparent, taking thence, in line with Sceptical practice, what seems to be expedient.  
(PH1 236-7)

Sextus explains that Pyrrhonism also relies on the phenomena apparent to *reason and senses*. Pyrrhonists too allow themselves to talk about the ‘common features’ of an affliction and think of certain occurrences as ‘indications’, yet they use these terms in a non-scientific “straightforward way.” (PH1 240).

This brings out well the inherently practical nature of Pyrrhonist philosophy. Sextus does not have a theory of tranquillity, does not provide any specific list of natural properties that would constitute this state of mind and does not claim his treatment will cure away all the ills of ordinary life. Yet he allows himself to diagnose his philosophical patients on the basis of the pathological pattern they seem to exemplify: those who pride themselves of their rational prowess and find strong justification through philosophical argument do not seem particularly likely to cope well with what seems to be the aporetic nature of human life. It is easy to see how the promises of, for example, Stoic philosophy would not help to mitigate our expectations. In fact, these self-proclaimed doctors of philosophy seem to suffer from their self-induced ‘affliction of rashness and conceit’ even more.

Pyrrhonists instead choose to infiltrate the domains of philosophic dissension and try to recreate in others the intellectual catharsis that caused their own tranquillity. For his therapy, Sextus is prepared to use whatever dogmatic tools he deems

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<sup>52</sup> Michael Frede, “The Method of the So-called Methodical School of Medicine,” *Science and Speculation: Studies in Hellenistic Theory and Practice* ed. Jonathan Barnes, Jacques Brunschwig, Myles Burnyeat and Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984) 4.

appropriate to bring about equipollence: the *five modes* are merely an example of this. Sometimes Sextus explains to his unwilling patients the practical nature of his therapy in plain terms: his arguments are meant to create argumentative equipollence, which could 'cause' the patient to suspend judgment. Arguments are thus mere argumentative devices, which will flush themselves out along with the affliction it means to purge the patient from. Yet in order to convince the more stubborn Stoic patient as well, he may resort to more drastic measures, for:

The doctor says something false about the health of the sick person, and promises to give him something but does not give it. He says something false but does not lie; for it is with a view to the health of the person in his care that he takes such a recourse (M7 43)

One could feel somewhat perplexed by Sextus' claim that "*those who hold the opinion that things are good or bad by nature are perpetually troubled*". It is quite a dramatic claim indeed, and one cannot be completely sure that Sextus himself did not tacitly endorse it. Pyrrhonists, however, do not have to worry about this: having had enjoyed their intellectual catharsis they need not worry about the exact epistemological status of the arguments anymore.

For just as it is not impossible for the person who has climbed to a high place by a ladder to knock over the ladder with his foot after his climb, so it is not unlikely that the skeptic too, having got to the accomplishment of his task by a sort of step-ladder – the argument showing that there is not demonstration – should do away with this argument (M7 280-1)

### **Pyrrhonism: a brief conclusion**

Pyrrhonism thus presents itself as an existential alternative to its philosophical neighbours, a wholly *practical* philosophy that does not even allow for its own sceptical convictions to be held firmly. Sextus' scepticism serves a distinctly reactive therapeutic purpose: his arguments are meant to intensify philosophical doubt to the level of utter intellectual despair, and cause in his readers a definitive suspension of judgment. Hence Pyrrhonism provides an alternative route out of an otherwise utterly inconclusive epistemic enquiry. It does so by implicitly bringing into view the one assumption that

epistemists usually leave unchallenged: the common ancient misconception that human belief can only be justified insofar as it constitutes an article of knowledge. Sextus' own modern-day interpreters, however, quite adequately exemplify just how ineffective Pyrrhonism has been as an actual therapy.

## CHAPTER 2: FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

Quite similarly to the case of Pyrrhonism, nothing better corroborates Nietzsche's scepticism about the value of rational argument than does the curious philosophical reception history of his thought. While all commentators seem to agree on the importance of the insights that can be gained from studying his wildly enigmatic works, there is hardly a shred of agreement as to what might be his exact conclusion, an anomaly ironically anticipated by Nietzsche himself:

Posthumous people (me, for instance) are understood worse than contemporary ones but heard better. More precisely: no one ever understands us - and that's what gives us our authority . . . (TI 15, p157)

My analysis of Nietzsche's thought, then, starts from the assumption that any acceptable interpretation must be able to account for this apparent meta-interpretational fact too. In order to do so, I start from the originally unpublished essay *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, which I argue contains all key ingredients to understanding Nietzsche's radical scepticism about reason. Far from merely making some claims "designed to startle those who see philosophy as essentially a quest for truth in the correspondence sense, a search for accurate representation,"<sup>53</sup> the essay marks the start of what I will henceforth call Nietzsche's *genealogy of knowledge*, eventually leading to the complete deconstruction of both the *value* and the *possibility* of truth.

In this chapter, I argue that Nietzsche's puzzling sceptical oeuvre – ridden as it is with bold metaphysical claims, apocalyptic exclamations, anti-theoretical ranting and multi-layered forms of argumentative self-refutation – is to serve the distinctly *practical* aim of unpursuing the reader to seek for knowledge. Having uncovered the petty psychological processes underlying rational thought, as well as the meaninglessness of existence, Nietzsche invites us instead to embrace his *manly scepticism*, requiring our cheerful embracement of ordinary belief, while insisting on our existential duty to *create* proper meaning to life.

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<sup>53</sup> Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins, "Nietzsche's Work and Themes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Bernd Magnus and Kathleen M. Higgins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 29.

In section one, I examine the scope of Nietzsche's scepticism by reconstructing his *genealogy of knowledge*. He exposes the illusionary character of ordinary certainty, a mere outgrowth of an age-old unconscious process of arbitrary designation, conceptual rigidity and intellectual self-deceit. If undertaken with rational integrity, philosophy demands that we uncover our cognitive entitlements as a mirage, and our faith in reason as a *masterpiece* of existential self-deception. The fundamental mistake of philosophy, however, lies not in its failure to ward off sceptical misfortune, but in its unconscious adherence to the *value* of knowledge. In part two, I examine the dangerous consequences of this sceptical discovery, saddling Nietzsche himself with a severe form of existential nihilism. Having unveiled the apparent meaninglessness of existence, he argues, one can only be saved from fatalist despair by cheerfully embracing this sceptical outcome. Nietzsche advocates his scepticism as a middle-road between intuition and reason, truth and lie. On the one hand, we should boldly face the devastating fact that none of our thoughts can be reasonably substantiated. On the other hand, we should take rational responsibility for our inherent need for certainty, thus allowing ourselves to lie in order to live. The third section is devoted to the philosophical methodology – or rather: apparent lack of methodology – of Nietzsche's sceptical philosophy of life. An evident aversion to proper philosophical argument reveals Nietzsche affinity with ancient Pyrrhonism, an affinity he refuses to accept only because of what he perceives to be Sextus' cognitive *fatalism*. Nietzsche really does not seem to allow himself even the slightest amount of sceptical principle, thereby rendering his own "*manly scepticism*" (BGE 209) enigmatically under-defined. Nietzsche should be conceived as an enigmatic philosophical psychologist, therapeutically employing his genealogical method in order to reveal to his readers the fundamental mechanisms underlying their own human thought. The most challenging exercise he saddles his philosophical interpreters with is to withstand the very inclination to agree with him:

"It is absolutely unnecessary, and not even desirable, for you to argue in my favour; on the contrary, a dose of curiosity, as if you were looking at an alien plant with ironic distance, would strike me as an incomparably more intelligent attitude toward me" (Letter to Carl Fuchs, July 29, 1888)<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Rüdiger Safranski, *Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography*, transl. Shelley Frisch (New York: Norton, 2002), 298.



## 1) DIAGNOSIS: REASON, PATHOLOGY AND TRUTH

Quite similarly to the case of Pyrrhonism, the arguments leading up to Nietzsche's radical doubt about reason have proven difficult to swallow for some modern analytic-minded philosophers. In *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, Bernd Magnus observes that *On Truth and Lies* has been particularly popular amongst postmodern scholars and literary theorists for its insistence that truth is only metaphor, inviting commentators with a more analytic background to lament that the essay cannot be regarded a proper justificatory document for radical scepticism, as one cannot leave untouched the metaphysical assumptions and self-refuting nature of the arguments.<sup>55</sup> Maudemary Clark has championed the actual rehabilitation of Nietzsche as an analytically acceptable philosopher. She argues that *On Truth and Lies* belongs to "Nietzsche's juvenilia," written under the influence of the very mode of metaphysical thinking that Nietzsche gradually came to reject in his "mature" works.<sup>56</sup>

In this section I argue that *On Truth and Lies*, while not free of metaphysical content, never adheres to any particular conception of truth. After giving voice to Nietzsche's sceptical diagnosis, I bring out Clark's reasons for refuting it, as well as her account of Nietzsche's alleged adherence to science and common sense. Most importantly, I show that Clark makes the familiar analytic mistake of focussing on Nietzsche's external world scepticism, thereby missing the main point of the essay. Nietzsche here starts off his *genealogy of knowledge*, the question why we would place so much value on our beliefs being true in the first place. Nietzsche's work here, I argue, was further developed most notably in *The Gay Science* and *Beyond Good and Evil*,<sup>57</sup> but remained unabandoned even in his later work. Contrary to what Clark thinks, Nietzsche's radical scepticism ultimately undermines not only the value of knowledge but also the unsubstantiated idea of *rational* thought. I show that even the most evident anti-sceptical passages in his later work can be coherently interpreted in light of Nietzsche's abysmal scepticism on human reason.

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<sup>55</sup> Magnus "Nietzsche's Work and Themes," 30.

<sup>56</sup> Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 65.

<sup>57</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 22.

## The genesis of self-deceit

The overture of *On Truth and Lies* leaves no doubt about Nietzsche's sceptical intentions. Ironically taking a view from nowhere, Nietzsche tells a short fable about "*the most arrogant and mendacious minute of 'world history'*" during which "*cleaver beasts invented knowing.*" None of these creatures seem to realise how "*miserable, how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary*" their beliefs actually are. The main advocates and most solemn proponents of human knowledge are found in philosophy, vainly assuming that their invaluable intellects have "*the world's axis turning within it.*" But humanity's intellectual submission to the apparent products of the intellect is not something Nietzsche only reproaches philosophers for. The art of self-deceit, "*a continuous fluttering around the solitary flame of vanity*" is rather the "*rule and the law*" amongst men (TL115).

What our race of self-deceivers seem to have forgotten, Nietzsche argues, is the "*unique and entirely individual original experience*" to which every one of our conceptions owes its origin, for:

Every concept arises from the equation of unequal things. Just as it is certain that one leaf is never totally the same as another, so it is certain that the concept "leaf" is formed by arbitrarily discarding these individual differences and by forgetting the distinguishing aspects. (TL 117)

Hence when we talk of 'leaves,' we use a concept that "*simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases,*" and as such will never fully express any actual state of reality. Nietzsche does not merely mean to reject Platonism when he argues that we have nevertheless "*awakened the idea*" that there is such thing as a 'leaf' in itself. A similar sort of confusion is exemplified in our use of the word 'honesty,' which we use as if referring to an actually existing quality. The fact that we cannot quite express what 'honesty' actually *is* does not constitute a rational failure, but rather a conceivable result of the equivocation of "*countless individualized and consequently unequal actions*" in one concept (TL 117). According to Nietzsche, the same sort of thing happens when we entertain the idea that "*the stone is hard*" or talk of things being "*'red,' or 'cold,' or 'mute.'*" We speak "*as if these qualities are otherwise familiar to us,*" as if they are real

instantiations of an occurrence in the external world, forgetting that such words merely refer to a *“totally subjective stimulation”* (TL 116).

An even more fundamental mistake is made when we distinguish between different objects. According to Nietzsche, this process of differentiation is utterly arbitrary:

We separate things according to gender, designating the tree as masculine and the plant as feminine. What arbitrary assignments! How far this oversteps the canons of certainty! We speak of a "snake": this designation touches only upon its ability to twist itself and could therefore also fit a worm. What arbitrary differentiations! (TL 116)

While these examples might not immediately reveal the arbitrariness of *all* human concepts – for that would be *“just as indemonstrable”* (TL 117) – the point of the argument is that we cannot simply *assume*, as was famously formulated by Plato’s Phaedrus, that we *carve nature at its joints*. Thus in respect to reality, Nietzsche argues, we might well be like a deaf person studying *Chladni sound figures* (“patterns made on a sand-covered flat surface by the sonic vibrations produced by a string affixed below the plane”<sup>58</sup>): despite not having proper phenomenological access to the object of interest, he will probably *“swear that he must know what men mean by ‘sound.’”* In the same way, Nietzsche argues, we may think we speak of real *“trees, colours, snow, and flowers”* while we merely make an *“artistic transference of a nerve stimulus into images.”* When we speak of the world as our object of knowledge we actually find ourselves confronted with two spheres between which *“there is no causality, no correctness, and no expression; there is, at most, an aesthetic relation”* (TL 119)

Despite these unstable foundations, mankind has allowed itself to create *“a pyramidal order according to castes and degrees (...) a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations,”* a world appearing to us *“more solid, more universal, better known, and more human than the immediately perceived world.”* But, Nietzsche says, we only impress ourselves with the lawlike regularity found in science and ordinary belief: we may think that our conceptual building blocks ultimately correspond to the *“original entities,”* but if not derived from *“cloud-cuckoo-land,”* our ideas are certainly not derived from the

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<sup>58</sup> On Truth And lies, footnote blz 116

"*essence of things*" (TL 117). He thus draws a conclusion that merits full citation here, if only for its poetic quality:

What then is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and; anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions – they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins

### Clark's anti-sceptical struggle

The rather bold claim implicit in Nietzsche's sceptical early essay, that we cannot establish the validity of any of our beliefs, has instigated a fair amount of analytic opposition. Clark has given voice to the two obvious anti-sceptical objections. Firstly, if this were Nietzsche's view on truth he would lead himself into hopeless self-contradiction. For if it is true that truths are illusions, the sceptical proposition cannot itself be true, "and if it is not supposed to be true, it seems that we have no reason to take it seriously, that is, accept it or its alleged implications." If Nietzsche were to say something meaningful about knowledge, he simply cannot reject "basic logic."<sup>59</sup> Secondly, Nietzsche's position seems to entail a particularly violent form of idealism, a view to be dismissed for being – as one commentator called it – "Kantian with a capital 'K'."<sup>60</sup> Amongst the many examples to be cited in favour of this objection is Nietzsche's repeated insistence that "*anthropomorphic truth*" is of "*limited value*" for not containing "*a single point which would be 'true in itself'*" (TL 119), and his claim that (*a*)ll that we actually know about these laws of nature is what we ourselves bring to them – time and space, and therefore relationships of succession and number" (TL 120). Clark finds evident traces of Schopenhauerian pessimism in Nietzsche's claim that our ordinary "metaphors" fail to refer to the "*original essences*" of the actual world. She argues that in fact, the entire argument against truth presupposes a particularly indefensible version of the "metaphysical correspondence theory," according to which the envisioned *thing-*

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<sup>59</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Hill, R. Kevin, *Nietzsche's Critiques: The Kantian Foundations of his Thought*, Oxford University Press, 2003, 242pp, \$55.00 (hbk), ISBN 0199255830.

*in-itself* is to possess “a nature or qualities apart from human beings.”<sup>61</sup> Nietzsche’s denial of the external world makes sense, she says, on the assumption that only “universal validity” can provide the ultimate justification required for truth.

While some have therefore rejected Nietzsche’s ideas on knowledge altogether, Clark argues that the mistake lies with those proponents of “postmodern anti-rational philosophy” responsible for attributing such scepticism to Nietzsche in the first place.<sup>62</sup> Against this, she famously objects that *On Truth and Lies* belongs to “Nietzsche juvenilia,” the younger works that remained unpublished for a reason. The “mature” Nietzsche in fact realised his former metaphysical mistakes and ended up repudiating his extreme scepticism in his later works. On Clark’s account, *The Gay Science* and *Beyond Good and Evil* mark a transitional stage, the “middle works” during which Nietzsche starts rejecting his former metaphysical self while still adhering to the idea that there is only one form of truth, and all belief is therefore false.<sup>63</sup> His last six books however, contain “no evidence” of Nietzsche’s continued commitment to what Clark calls the “falsification thesis.”<sup>64</sup> Nietzsche’s “mature” position allows for “independent things” that can be observed from different perspectives while not thereby being reducible to mere representations. According to Clark, Nietzsche implicitly accepted a “common sense version of the correspondence theory,” a view that according to Clark entails:

the equivalence principle (that "grass is green" is true, for instance, iff grass is green) and common sense realism (the claim that the world exists independently of our representations of it)<sup>65</sup>

### ***A genealogy of knowledge***

If Clark is right about Nietzsche’s later views, she not only invalidates my programmatic choice of taking *On Truth and Lies* as a starting point into his sceptical thinking, for Nietzsche would not even classify as a sceptic at all. However, Clark seems to draw her remarkable conclusions only after completely misinterpreting the point of Nietzsche’s

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<sup>61</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 66

<sup>62</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 22.

<sup>64</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 31.

<sup>65</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 30.

sceptical arguments in *On Truth and Lies*, as well as missing the essay's ironic undertone. The main topic here is not whether our truths are universally justified, but why one would have such "*most flattering estimation of the value of knowing*" in the first place (TL 114).

An important starting point of the essay is Nietzsche's Darwinian observation that the intellect is merely a "*means for the preserving of the individual,*" humanity's cognitive equivalent of horns and teeth in the battle for existence (TL 115). Consequently, its job is not to *know*, but to employ its deceptive means in order to further the individual's cause. The intellect in fact "*unfolds its principal powers in dissimulation:*"

Deception, flattering, lying, deluding, talking behind the back, putting up a false front, living in borrowed splendour, wearing a mask, hiding behind convention, playing a role for others and for oneself (...) is so much the rule and the law among men that there is almost nothing which is less comprehensible than how an honest and pure drive for truth could have arisen among them. (TL 115)

Nietzsche here starts what I take to be his *genealogy of knowledge*, his search for an explanation of our enigmatic drive for truth. The essay itself only provides a rudimentary start to an answer. Nietzsche argues that the "*uniformly valid and binding designations*" we now call knowledge must have been invented for communicative purposes, enabling the individual to "*live socially and with the herd*" (TL 117). He gives a preliminary explanation of how the truth-lie dichotomy could have arisen in this social context: when certain individuals employ the technique of deliberate misdesignation in a deceptively "*selfish and moreover harmful manner,*" society would have good reason to morally condemn his lying behaviour. In a context where 'truth' is equivalent to the correct use of some agreed designations, it would constitute an obvious moral goal. But one cannot thereby explain why anyone would value truth in itself, truth regardless of any of its "*pleasant, life-preserving consequences*" (TL 116). It is only after we have forgotten that truths are illusion that we came to value it as the most valuable products of the intellect.

A further diagnosis of how this dissimulation came about is found in Nietzsche's middle works. He explicitly continues the project in *The Gay Science*, in a passage devoted to *The origin of our concept of 'knowledge'* (GS 355). He more or less abandoned

his truth-lie model and identifies the source of our drive for truth our fear of uncertainty instead. For:

isn't our need for knowledge precisely this need for the familiar, the will to uncover among everything strange, unusual, and doubtful something which no longer unsettles us? (GS 355)

Fear, Nietzsche argues, arises from a lack of cognitive familiarity with the object of its inducement. Hence our quest for knowledge is undertaken only because *"something unfamiliar is to be traced back to something familiar,"* the success of the explanation being measured unconsciously by the *"regained sense of security"* it may or may not deliver. This means that the trustworthiness of ordinary knowledge *"lies not in its degree of truth but in its age, its embeddedness, its character as a condition of life"* (GS 111): ideas that are *"generated millions of times and has been handed down for many generations"* have become our main *"articles of faith"* only because of their capacity to diminish our uncertainties. Nietzsche clearly echoes his old ideas here: the *"new world of laws, privileges, subordinations, and clearly marked boundaries,"* has come to be regarded as the reasonable alternative to the *"vivid world of first impressions,"* the *"brightly coloured whirlwind of the senses"* (BGE 14) that we wish to explain away. But one should not be too quick to refute Nietzsche as an idealist here, for the idealist is refuted on the very same basis:

Take the philosopher who imagined the world to be 'known' when he had reduced it to the 'idea'; wasn't it precisely because the 'idea' was so familiar to him and he was so used to it? because he no longer feared the 'idea'? - How little these men of knowledge demand! (GS 355)

### **Philosophy as the ultimate mistake of mankind**

At this stage, the *genealogy of knowledge* could still be compatible with Clark's account of Nietzsche as a recovering sceptic, slowly proceeding towards the embracement of common sense. Indeed, he seems to explain how reasonable it is to accept our ordinary beliefs, for *"where life and knowledge seem to contradict each other, there was never any serious fight to begin with; denial and doubt were simply considered madness"* (GS110).

But in these cases, no *rational* choice is being made, the intellect rather pauses reason and temporarily becomes “*stupider than it usually is*” when it employ its art of dissimulation in the service of ordinary certainty (GS 3).

Moreover, any positivist reading of Nietzsche would have to cope with his sceptical account of logical thinking, which he explains arose from the “*predominant disposition (...) to treat the similar as identical - an illogical disposition, for there is nothing identical as such*” (GS 111). Those “*who in all similar cases immediately divined the equality,*” hence “*not seeing correctly [i.e. in accordance to his conceptual scheme]*” enjoyed a distinct advantage over sceptics and other heterogeneous thinkers, those who think too cautiously and “*saw everything ‘in flux’*” (GS 111). In the ancient struggle for survival, rashly classifying all tigers as dangerous would be much more prudent than the more intellectual move of pondering over the existence of unharmed tigers. Yet that means that untruthfulness, intellectual dishonesty lies at the basis of logic:

to affirm rather than suspend judgment, to mistake and fabricate rather than wait, to assent rather than deny, to decide rather than be in the right - had been cultivated with extra ordinary assiduity.

At the end of this process, then, philosophers solidified the mistake that mankind had long been working towards: it enshrined our misconceptions about human reason by electing the otherwise unsubstantiated idea of *truth* as its ultimate goal and the highest human good. Early philosophical dispute arose, says Nietzsche, arose “*wherever two antithetical maxims appeared to be applicable to life, because both of them were compatible with the fundamental errors*” (GS 110). But during the intellectual fight, breaking out over the “*greater or lesser degree of usefulness for life*” of their proposed principles, philosophers succumbed to their “*lust for power.*” Philosophy “*became a business, an attraction, a calling, a duty, an honour*” and its proponents forgot about their own impulses and started regarding of rational debate as “*a completely free, self-originated activity*” that aims towards the production of truth, which “*ended up having the appearance and innocence of the good*” (GS 110). As philosophy unleashed upon itself a grand diversity of moral, metaphysical and epistemological meta-questions, it reified as a human need its very own activity of “*cognizing and striving for the true.*” Blinded by its unwarranted faith in reason, philosophy eventually took itself seriously enough to doubt man’s other main faculty, the more reliable instruments of sense-perception:



'There must be some deception here, some illusory level of appearances preventing us from perceiving things that have being: where is the deceiver?' - 'We've got it!' they shout in ecstasy, 'it is in sensibility! These senses that are so immoral anyway, now they are deceiving us about the true world (TI *Reason in Philosophy* 1, p167)

Throughout his later works, Nietzsche often reiterates what seems to be his main objection to philosophy: that it encourages us to *reject*, or even falsify, the otherwise reliable products of sense-perception. By denying this “immediately perceived world” philosophers started a “*secret raging against the preconditions of life*” (WP 253).

### **Nietzsche's scepticism of the 'external world'**

Given this surprising adherence to the senses at the end of his philosophical career, one may be tempted to think that Clark is right. She argues that we witness Nietzsche's ultimate overcoming of the ideal of ultimate truth in *Twilight of the Idols*. While he remains critical about our capacity of obtaining knowledge, Nietzsche took up a pragmatic acceptance of those beliefs that would best suit our human needs. He laments Christianity for its “*hatred for reality*” (AC 29) and all metaphysical claims made by science and philosophy:

And even your atom, my dear Mr Mechanist and Mr Physicist, how many errors, how much rudimentary psychology is left in your atom! Not to mention the 'thing-in-itself', the *horrendum pudendum* of metaphysicians! The error of thinking that the mind caused reality! And to make it the measure of reality! And to call it God! (TI p178)

Clark thus ascribes to Nietzsche the following position: that despite the contingent state of our beliefs, and despite the fact that we are “finite creatures with a limited amount of time to discover truths,” we may still rationally decide which of our conflicting views may be preferable given our “cognitive interests or standards of rational

acceptability.”<sup>66</sup> It is for this reason, Clark argues, that “Nietzsche’s last six books (...) provide no evidence of his commitment to the falsification thesis” anymore.<sup>67</sup>

Yet although scattered, Nietzsche does seem to pick up his very same analysis of knowledge along his later works: in *Twilight of the Idols*, he argues on multiple occasions that the only criterion we have for truth is our *conviction* (AC p10); Nietzsche again comes back to his psychological explanation of belief that asking for an explanation is “*basically a matter of wanting to get rid of unpleasant thoughts,*” and that “*the first idea that can familiarize the unfamiliar feels good enough to be 'considered true'*” (TI p179-180). This sort of mechanisms foreclose the possibility that “*anything novel, alien, or previously unencountered*” can count as the cause of our belief: we will quite necessarily resort to “the most common explanation” in order to convince ourselves. On Nietzsche’s view, we have come to believe that our most basic beliefs are true only because “*truth is confused with the effects of believing that something is true*” (TI 5).

On this most radical interpretation, Nietzsche’s scepticism involves the idea that “*every belief, every considering-something-true, is necessarily false*” (WP p37). In order for our ideas to be convincing, Nietzsche explains, we *must* falsify the “*brightly colored whirlwind of the senses*” (BGE 14). While Clark thinks that *Twilight of the Idols* could constitute a defence of common sense, the following passage seems to indicate the opposite:

When all the other philosophical folk threw out the testimony of the senses because it showed multiplicity and change, Heraclitus threw it out because it made things look permanent and unified. Heraclitus did not do justice to the senses either. (...) *What we do with the testimony of the senses, that is where the lies begin*, like the lie of unity, the lie of objectification, of substance, of permanence ... 'Reason' makes us falsify the testimony of the senses. The senses are not lying when they show becoming, passing away, and change,... But Heraclitus will always be right in thinking that being is an empty fiction. *The 'apparent' world is the only world: the 'true world' is just a lie added on to it ...* (TI Reason in Philosophy 2, p167)

What seems to inform Clark’s interpretation is precisely the intellectual self-deception that Nietzsche criticises traditional philosophy for: she assumes that our lack of

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<sup>66</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 49.

<sup>67</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 108-9.

certainty is an anomaly; an anomaly that can only be overcome by rationally establishing what is *really* true – one may add: true in itself.

### **The ‘real nature’ of Nietzsche’s scepticism**

On Nietzsche’s account philosophy indeed created an enormous sceptical problem: the mistake being not that it adheres to an overly ambitious metaphysical conception of knowledge, but that it insists on rationally discovering what is really true. The real problem thus lies in our persistent trust in reason. It may constitute a useful tool, but:

Trust in reason and its categories, in dialectic, therefore the valuation of logic, proves only their usefulness for life, proved by experience - not that something is true.

Thus every valuation of every day life, every "*I believe that this and that is so*" is in fact a lie. On this view, the actual existence of ‘external objects’ would be the least of our problems, for:

What does man actually know about himself? Is he, indeed, ever able to perceive himself completely, as if laid out in a lighted display case? Does nature not conceal most things from him – even concerning his own body – in order to confine and lock him within a proud, deceptive consciousness, aloof from the coils of the bowels, the rapid flow of the blood stream, and the intricate quivering of the fibers! She threw away the key. And woe to that fatal curiosity which might one day have the power to peer out and down through a crack in the chamber of consciousness and then suspect that man is sustained in the indifference of his ignorance by that which is pitiless, greedy, insatiable, and murderous – as if hanging in dreams on the back of a tiger (TL 116)

In *On Truth and Lies*, Nietzsche was already quite convinced of the idea that our intellect has been deceiving its possessor not only of its own constitution, but of the "*value of existence*" itself (TL 116). The eventual unveiling of these well-kept secrets became inevitable at the moment that Socrates started insisting on the "*hypertrophy of logic*" by thrusting his "*sylogistic knife*" in every form of certainty (TI p205):

'At any price': we understand this well enough once we have offered and slaughtered one faith after another on this altar! Consequently, 'will to truth' does not mean 'I do not want to let myself be deceived' but - there is no alternative - 'I will not deceive, not even myself' (CW p282)

## Conclusion

On Clark's interpretation of his thought, the younger Nietzsche made a metaphysical mistake, one that he managed to overcome by further intellectual inquiry into the *problem of knowledge*. Yet her account seems to be informed by the same old philosophical misconceptions that Nietzsche seems to address: that epistemic uncertainty is an *anomaly* that *should* be overcome through better employment of human *reason*. She thereby persistently ignores Nietzsche's repeated warnings not to approach matters this way. For on his *genealogy of knowledge*, the value of a belief can be solely measured by its capability to accommodate new forms of sensational information. However, that does not prove their truth or falsehood in any relevant philosophical sense. In her insistence on the inherent philosophical validity of common sense, and her willingness to explain away any interpretational anomaly in order to get Nietzsche to agree with her, Clark exemplifies precisely the sort of philosophical behaviour Nietzsche objects to. To those who try to justify the illusion of "*the existence of 'immediate certainties,'*" he ironically replies:

"My dear sir," (...), "it is improbable that you are not mistaken: but why insist on the truth?" (BGE 15)

## 2) SCEPTICISM AS THERAPY: DANCING ON THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS

While Clark seems fundamentally mistaken about the nature of Nietzsche's sceptical stance, she nevertheless points to a factor that cannot be ignored: with regard to the issue of truth, there seems to be a development in Nietzsche's thought. For in his later books, Nietzsche seems to gain philosophical confidence, as if the whole problem of scepticism wasn't bothering him anymore. We should not be surprised to find that according to Clark's traditional philosophical preconceptions, Nietzsche could have only done so by finding what is *really* true, for:

One can only affirm life to the extent that one knows the truth about it - otherwise one affirms one's illusions about life, not life itself.<sup>68</sup>

While her interpretation of Nietzsche epistemological position seems to be entirely mistaken, Clark nevertheless addresses an important issue: for how could a philosopher who "devoted his life to the pursuit of truth, decides not to care about the truth anymore?"<sup>69</sup> While she therein appreciates the *practical* purpose of Nietzsche's philosophical project, Clark seems to misinterpret completely what Nietzsche's sceptical insight must have amounted to. Rather than affirming the epistemological misconception that our beliefs must be *true* in order to have any value for human life, Nietzsche regains a sense of cognitive self-control only by *accepting* the fact that our beliefs are self-created, hence inherently contingent.

In this section, I first show how Nietzsche sceptically pushes himself over the edge of the intellectual abyss, and unveils what seems to be the meaninglessness of existence. He only manages to overcome his existential nihilism by retaking a practical sense of certainty, by embracing the fact that he must lie to himself in order to live. In Nietzsche's later works, I argue, we find his embracement of the fact that ultimately, man is "*like a leaf in the wind, a plaything of nonsense*" (GM3 28). Nietzsche urges us not to let ourselves be undone by this apparent fact of life: his "*manly scepticism*"<sup>70</sup> demands that we resist our inescapable tendency to value what is *true*, and instead create better *lies* to adhere to.

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<sup>68</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 200.

<sup>69</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy*, 198.

<sup>70</sup> Adi Parush, "Nietzsche on the Sceptic's Life," in *Review of Metaphysics* (29.3),

## The existential consequences of radical scepticism

As indicated in the previous chapter, Nietzsche's philosophical analysis cannot but invite a severe sense of philosophical uncertainty, leaving the reader with a bunch of convictions he might now realise cannot be rationally warranted. In *On Truth and Lies*, Nietzsche first warns us about the main danger of epistemic scepticism: our quest for knowledge might well unveil the fact that humanity's rational self-image might have been a "*masterpiece*" of intellectual self-deception (TL 115). By trying to answer the sceptic, one might well facilitate one's own sceptical downfall. Or in more poetic words: "*Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you*" (BGE 146).

For the purpose of this paper, however, it will be necessary to carefully peek into the abyss anyway. Throughout Nietzsche's *genealogy of truth*, we in fact often encounter his scepticism about human consciousness. Given his analysis of knowledge, we should be unsurprised to find that it merely developed under the pressing need for communication. Nietzsche argues that "*we became aware of ourselves only halfway this process.*" Yet our usual self-awareness is evidently mistaken: when we came to think of it as that which has the highest value, constituting "*the kernel of man*" (GS 354), we actually performed our greatest *self-deception*: according to Nietzsche, "selfishness" – the identification and preoccupation with the 'self' – is our "*masterpiece in the art of survival*" (EH 9). In fact, human consciousness developed only in its capacity as "*a net connecting one person with another*" since "*solitary and predatory person would not have needed it*" (GS...). A person, for Nietzsche, is itself a piece of faith: by the "*prejudice of reason*" we might make use of such concepts as "*unity, identity, permanence, substance, cause, objectification, being*" but these are simplifications; our self-image as men, properly observed, is an error of reason, for reason:

sees doers and deeds all over: it believes that will has causal efficacy: it believes in the '!', in the I as being, in the I as substance, and it projects this belief in the I-substance onto all things - this is how it creates the concept of 'thing' in the first place . . . Being is imagined into everything - pushed under everything - as a cause; the concept of 'being' is only derived from the concept of '!' . . . In the beginning there was the great disaster of an error, the belief that the will is a thing with causal efficacy, - that will is a faculty . . . These days we know that it is just a word . . . (TI p169)

When Nietzsche explicates the Pyrrhonian idea that we have no “organ for truth” he really seems to mean that there is no actual organ, that “we 'know' (or believe or imagine) exactly as much as is useful to the human herd, to the species: and even what is here called 'usefulness' is finally also just a belief, a fiction” (GS 111) We have been lucky thus far that our “ridiculous overestimation and misapprehension of consciousness” prevented us until now from inquiring into its very nature itself. For from being metaphysicians here, all men “have got tangled up in the snares of grammar (of folk metaphysics)” and missed the fact that our consciousness:

(...) is finely developed only in relation to its usefulness to community or herd; and that consequently each of us, even with the best will in the world to understand ourselves as individually as possible, 'to know ourselves', will always bring to consciousness precisely that in ourselves which is 'non- individual', that which is 'average'; that due to the nature of consciousness - to the 'genius of the species' governing it - our thoughts themselves are continually as it were outvoted and translated back into the herd perspective. (...) This is what I consider to be true phenomenalism and perspectivism: that due to the nature of animal consciousness, the world of which we can become conscious is merely a surface- and sign-world, a world turned into generalities and thereby debased to its lowest common denominator, that everything which enters consciousness thereby becomes shallow, thin, relatively stupid, general, a sign, a herd-mark; that all becoming conscious involves a vast and thorough corruption, falsification, superficialization, and generalization. (GS 354)

## **Headfirst into the Abyss**

Nietzsche's initial embracement of these ideas comes in form of self-denial hitherto unseen in philosophy. He did not halt before the abyss, but instead kept true to his own unconscious valuation of the ideal of *truth*:

We philosophers are not free to separate soul from body as the common people do; we are even less free to separate soul from spirit. We are no thinking frogs, no objectifying and registering devices with frozen innards -we must constantly give birth to our thoughts out of our pain and maternally endow them with all that we have of blood, heart, fire, pleasure, passion, agony, conscience, fate, and disaster. Life - to us, that means constantly transforming all that we are into light and flame, and also all that wounds us; we simply can do no other.

As a result, Nietzsche occasionally suffered severe depression. While it is not entirely biographically clear *when* these breakdowns might have taken place, we have good reason to assume that his problems started well before he wrote *On Truth and Lies*. At the end of the essay Nietzsche tacitly approves of the sceptical inquirer, the *intuitive man* who somehow managed to see right through his own lies, instead grasping the heterogeneous nature of reality. Nietzsche shows some sense of identification with this “*overjoyed hero*” making good on his insight that the world can only be really justified “*as an aesthetic phenomenon*,” as a body of lies we have drawn up ourselves (BT §5). No help can be expected here from his counterpart, the *rational man* who “*only succeeds (...) in warding off misfortune*” by sticking to his beliefs “*without ever gaining any happiness for himself from these abstractions*” (TL p121).

Nietzsche’s initial “*scorn for abstraction*,” his nihilist contempt of “*the cozy warm wodd of mist in which healthy people saunter without thinking*” (D 114) might very well have constituted his main practical problem. In the *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche admits coming out of a long period “*privation and powerlessness*” which included:

exhaustion, loss of faith, icing-up in the midst of youth; this onset of dotage at the wrong time; this tyranny of pain surpassed still by the tyranny of a pride that refused the conclusions of pain - and conclusions are consolations; this radical seclusion as a self-defence against a pathologically clairvoyant contempt for humanity, this limitation in principle to what was bitter, harsh, painful to know, as prescribed by the nausea that had gradually developed from an incautious and excessively luxurious spiritual diet - one calls it romanticism - oh, who could reexperience all of this as I did? (GS Preface 1)

In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche admits of his own mistake, his “*faith in unbelief to the point of martyrdom*,” as a sense of nihilism about the significance to life:

Nihilism as a psychological state will have to be reached, first, when we have sought a “*meaning*” in all events that is not there: so the seeker eventually becomes discouraged. Nihilism, then, is the recognition of the long waste of strength, the agony of the “*in vain*,” insecurity, the lack of any opportunity to recover and to regain composure--being ashamed in front of oneself, as if one had deceived oneself all too long.- (WP p12)



## The nihilist convalescent

Having briefly exposed the depths of Nietzsche's extreme sense of scepticism, I now turn to his equally-sceptical solution. In order to understand how one should overcome such nihilist inclination towards the "*radical repudiation of value, meaning, and desirability*," one may first familiarise oneself with how *not* to do it (WP p7). Nihilism, Nietzsche argues, might not be an unwarranted initial reaction to philosophical scepticism:

I call it Russian fatalism, the fatalism without revolt that you find when a military campaign becomes too difficult and the Russian soldier finally lies down in the snow. Not taking anything else on or in, - not reacting at all any more . . . The excellent reasoning behind this fatalism, which is not always just courage in the face of death, but can preserve life under the most dangerous circumstances, is that it reduces the metabolism, slows it down, a type of will to hibernation. (...) Since any sort of reaction wears you out too quickly, you do not react at all: this is the reasoning. And nothing burns you up more quickly than the affects of *ressentiment*. (EH p81)

However inadvisable as a reaction to illness, human beings have an unmistakable inclination towards *Ressentiment*; according to Nietzsche, this is most clearly exemplified in the tendency to think that '*someone or other must be to blame that I feel ill*' (GM3 15). In the case of existential scepticism, however, *ressentiment* usually expresses itself as a "hostility to life;" Nietzsche even diagnoses this attitude as the main source of all metaphysical, religious or scientific efforts to deny the meaninglessness of existence. In order to ward off uncertainty, they invent a grand diversity of ideals to adhere to – 'God', the 'soul', 'virtue', 'sin', the 'beyond', 'truth', 'eternal life.' Because of their illusive nature, however, such ideals are quite vulnerable to philosophical inquiry.

Alternatively, there are two types of reactions that Nietzsche has some affinity to: those of Pyrrhonism and Buddhism. Firstly, Nietzsche hails the Buddha as a philosophical psychologist, who:

detects a spiritual fatigue that manifests itself in an all-too-great 'objectivity' (which is to say an individual's diminished sense of self-interest, loss of a centre of gravity, loss of 'egoism'), he combats this by leading even the most spiritual interests directly back to the person. In the Buddha's teachings, egoism is a duty: the 'one thing needed', the 'how do you get rid of suffering', regulates and restricts the entire spiritual diet. (TI 2p22).

As a way of life, Buddhism, explicitly means to “*conquering resentment: to free the soul of this - the first step to recovery*” (EH 81). They Buddhists still conceive of themselves “*as judge of the world who finally places existence itself on his scales and finds it too light*” (GS 346). Pyrrhonists, whom Nietzsche calls the “*decent types in the history of philosophy*” for meeting the “*basic demands of intellectual integrity,*” seem to make the same mistake. They cultivate their “*sagacious weariness*” by living “*a lowly life among the lowly.*” As an alternative to nihilism, Buddhists and Pyrrhonists fail to really value human existence, a value that is “*refuted with a 'for'*” (WP 228).

### **Nietzsche's scepticism as a way of life**

What then is Nietzsche's philosophical advice? What constitutes his “*scepticism of daring manliness*” (BGE 209)? Most of Nietzsche's answers are phrased in explicitly in terms of the psychological aims of *health* and *strength*. His main answer, I argue, lies in one's attitude towards the will to *truth*:

This unconditional will to truth - what is it? Is it the will not to let oneself be deceived? Is it the will not to deceive? For the will to truth could be interpreted in this second way, too - if 'I do not want to deceive myself' is included as a special case under the generalization 'I do not want to deceive'. But why not deceive? But why not allow oneself to be deceived? (GS 344)

That, I think, is Nietzsche's ultimate recipe for the recovering sceptic, the *convalescent*. The appropriate sceptical attitude towards ordinary knowledge is not to reject it, but to accept it as an utterly unsubstantiated tool for life. The Buddha, Nietzsche argues, took adequate “*hygienic measures*” against any “*diminished sense of self-interest, loss of a centre of gravity, loss of 'egoism'*” that might arise from taking epistemic scepticism too seriously. He emphasises the inherent worth of such simple human goods as “*living out in the open, the wandering life, moderation and a careful diet; caution as far as liquor is concerned; caution when it comes to all affects that create bile or raise the blood temperature; no worrying about either yourself or other people*” (AC p20).

Yet it would not be quite *manly* to uncritically resort only to one's mundane ideas, and leave all existential matters rest. In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche warns against such overly strong adherence to intellectualism:

But if science provides us with less and less pleasure, and deprives us of more and more pleasure through casting suspicion on the consolations of metaphysics, religion and art, then that mightiest source of joy to which mankind owes almost all its humanity will become impoverished. For this reason a higher culture must give to man a double-brain, as it were two brain-ventricles, one for the perceptions of science, the other for those of non-science: lying beside one another, not confused together, separable, capable of being shut off; this is a demand of health. In one domain lies the power-source, in the other the regulator: it must be heated with illusions, onesidednesses, passions, the evil and perilous consequences of overheating. (HA 251)

In *On Truth and Lies*, Nietzsche already encourages his readers to create their own existential values, to cheerfully use "*forbidden metaphors and unheard-of combinations of concepts*" and regain a sense of existential pleasure. Instead of resenting our sceptical faith, we should rather embrace nihilism as a source of strength, enabling us to affirm life "*as an aesthetic phenomenon.*" In order to not lose ourselves in the process, however, we must also allow ourselves to be deceived by our ordinary beliefs, forming a "*protective diet against the danger of exaggeration, disharmony, and disproportion:*"

That it is the measure of strength to what extent we can admit to ourselves, without perishing, the merely apparent character, the necessity of lies. To this extent, nihilism, as the denial of a truthful world, of being, might be a divine way of thinking (WP p15)

### 3) TREATMENT: A PHILOSOPHY OF SELF-REFUTATION

Nietzsche thus pertains to having established a solution to his own scepticism, a new form of philosophy that would foster health and overcome any form of sceptical *or* dogmatic uncertainty. In arguing so, however, Nietzsche seems to rely solely on personal observations: the main interpretative question is how Nietzsche would escape the obvious charge of philosophical self-defeat, an anomaly he quite openly admits to:

I have gradually come to realize what every great philosophy so far has been: a confession of faith on the part of its author, and a type of involuntary and unself-conscious memoir (BGE 6)

There would be two possible ways of addressing this methodological issue. Firstly, one could take the analytical approach taken by Clark: if Nietzsche really wishes to argue in favour of his sceptical principles, he must reasonably explain why one should accept his account. If, on the other hand, we are to take Nietzsche's sceptical thought solely as a guide to life, Nietzsche must explain why we should take *his* advice for it. Reginald Hollingdale has formulated the main practical problem: for "where Nietzsche leaves philosophy and writes about himself his sense of his own quality passes the bounds of reasonableness and lands in absurdity..." Given Nietzsche's often-hysterical way of thinking, why should we not think of his philosophy as a mere expression of "Nietzsche's impending mental collapse: euphoria, megalomania."<sup>71</sup>

Jessica Berry has recently tried to salvage Nietzsche's therapeutic claims from both forms of sceptical self-refutation. She argues that Nietzsche is in fact ironically aiming his outrageous philosophical speculations at his fellow philosophers, whom he wishes to cure from the "*snare of such concepts as 'pure reason,' 'absolute spirituality' and 'knowledge in itself,' presupposing a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject'*" (GM3 12). Berry invites us to think of Nietzsche merely as an anti-metaphysical Pyrrhonist, leaving completely intact the rational standards he often seems to dispute.<sup>72</sup> In this section, I argue that while Berry's conception of Pyrrhonism seems well mistaken, she may well be right to think of Nietzsche as a modern-day successor to Sextus, as he seems to employ self-refutation as his very methodological principle. What

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<sup>71</sup> Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: The Man and his Philosophy*, 5.

<sup>72</sup> Berry, *Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition*, 65.

Berry fails to account for, however, is what I think constitutes Nietzsche's main methodological insight: that in order to attain a healthy outlook on life, a philosopher should first and foremost investigate the process of his *own* thinking. As such, Nietzsche's oeuvre might well be interpreted as a form of meta-Pyrrhonism, discrediting the efficacy of what we perceive to be *human reason* right up to the point of cheerful self-negation.

### Nietzsche as a Pyrrhonist

In this chapter, I first examine Berry's arguments in favour of interpreting Nietzsche as a methodological Pyrrhonist. At first sight, Berry's observations are in line with the account presented in the previous chapter. Nietzsche's practical scepticism, she thinks, reveals a greatly indebtedness to ancient ethical thinking, as he seems to share his main conception of tranquillity with Sextus Empiricus. On her account, both forms of Pyrrhonism would have a common lineage to Democritus, who's idea of *euthumia* could mean "*being in good spirits,*" but was said to involve the entire package of ideals that constituted philosophy as a way of life, including "*moderation in pleasure*" and "*proportion*" as an alternative to "*excess and deficiency*" which are "*apt to fluctuate and cause great changes in the soul.*"<sup>73</sup> Given these initial similarities, it would indeed be quite plausible to think that Sextus and Nietzsche adhere to the same practical aims.

In contrast to Sextus, however, Nietzsche does not clearly establish what it is that constitutes "*psychological health.*"<sup>74</sup> On the contrary, he argues that:

(...) of course, 'peacefulness of the soul' is just a misunderstanding, [...it] can be the gentle diffusion of a rich, animal nature into a moral (or religious) sphere. Or the beginning of fatigue, the first shadow of evening, of any type of evening. Or a sign of humidity in the air, of south winds approaching. Or an un self conscious gratitude for a good digestion (sometimes called 'love of humanity'). Or the quieting down of a convalescent who is tasting everything as if for the first time and who waits ... (...) Or the expression of maturity and mastery in the middle of doing, making, effecting, willing, a tranquil breathing, an attained 'freedom of the will' ... Twilight of the Idols: who knows? Perhaps this is just a type of 'peacefulness of the soul' too ... (TI *Morality as Anti-Nature* 3)

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<sup>73</sup> Berry, *Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition Nietzsche*, 132.

<sup>74</sup> Berry, *Nietzsche and the Ancient Skeptical Tradition Nietzsche*, 141.

Nietzsche's very non-commitment in this methodological respect could be an actual argument in favour of conceiving Nietzsche as a modern Pyrrhonist. Indeed, his anti-philosophical stance is often marked by an aversion to dogmatism. On Berry's account, Nietzsche in fact strives after suspension of judgment, for as "*perceptions cannot be assessed for their truth content*" it should be advisable to "*holding back*" one's opinion. Textual proof in favour of this interpretation can be found in the following passage, in which he encourages his readers to consider his philological stance:

Philology should be understood here in a very general sense, as the art of reading well, - to be able to read facts without falsifying them through interpretations, without letting the desire to understand make you lose caution, patience, subtlety. Philology as ephexis [suspension of judgment] in interpretation: whether it concerns books, newspaper articles, destinies, or facts about the weather, - not to mention 'salvation of the soul' ... (AC p52)

Further comparison between Nietzsche and Sextus is exemplified in *Ecce Homo*. Here, Nietzsche openly admits that "*Zarathustra is a sceptic,*" proceeding to applaud Pyrrhonists for talking "*out of both sides of their mouths,*" (EH 89) which Berry explains is a double philosophical pun: it both laments dogmatists for not being intellectually honest about their unwarranted ideas, and complements the sceptics for their strategy of equipollence.<sup>75</sup> Afterwards, he argues that philosophers of the future thus:

certainly will not be dogmatists. It would offend their pride, as well as their taste, if their truth were a truth for everyone (which has been the secret wish and hidden meaning of all dogmatic aspirations so far) (BGE 43)

Hence a strong case can be made for interpreting Nietzsche as a Pyrrhonist. Berry seems right to argue that Nietzsche often appears to play with his readers in an ironically uncommitted way: doubting the senses and then defending them, proposing what seems to be an immoralist point of view and then criticising this very position, defending his utterly metaphysical will-to-power thesis only to admit that it is ultimately indefensible.

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<sup>75</sup> Berry, Nietzsche, 9

## The practical anomaly of Nietzschean Pyrrhonism

My main objection to this methodological interpretation is that it seems to disregard Nietzsche's very *attitude* towards truth and falsehood. Even worse so, Berry actually seems to think that Nietzsche's main objection to traditional philosophy and over-ambitious science lies in its lack of appreciation for an entirely practical yet truth-directed sceptical account of knowledge:

What is crucial to clarify at this point is that Nietzsche sees nothing wrong with the project of seeking truth or knowledge as such. Inquiry, in any meaningful sense, is a goal-directed enterprise; it aims at knowledge of the truth. To gain knowledge and to resolve the "anomaly" in things is, as we have seen, precisely what the Skeptic—qua Zetetic—searches for.<sup>76</sup>

Berry argues that even *if* Nietzsche did not conceive of himself as a Pyrrhonist, we should still regard him as such. For Nietzsche's philosophy must constitute a radical modern manifestation of therapeutic scepticism, meant to cure away the philosopher's intellectual self-deceit and open the way for a more modest future form of knowledge. Having experienced heavy depression as the result of his initial scepticism, he must have realised that he had to sceptically overcome his very own radical scepticism as well, thus resorting to a more subtle middle position. Nietzsche's arguments, Berry thinks, should be appreciated merely as "a provocative challenge," not as a genealogical project entailing a sceptical "theory of truth."<sup>77</sup> What, then, *would* be the exact point of his sceptical therapy? Berry explains that "Nietzsche's overarching concern with the nihilistic tendency of modernity is what leads him to focus *not on truth as such*, but on us and our unflagging and almost inexplicable faith in its value." Nietzsche "quite clearly views himself too as a pursuer of knowledge—in fact, as a restless and relentless investigator and experimenter."<sup>78</sup>

While this interpretation could well be correct – it would be consistent with every single one of Nietzsche's 'provocative' claims – Berry essentially fails to explain why Nietzsche would persistently provide his sceptical advices. Why, for example,

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<sup>76</sup> Berry, *Nietzsche and the Ancient Sceptical Tradition*, 54.

<sup>77</sup> Berry, *Nietzsche and the Ancient Sceptical Tradition*, 52.

<sup>78</sup> Berry, *Nietzsche and the Ancient Sceptical Tradition*, 54.

would he claim that “*Objections, minor infidelities, cheerful mistrust, a delight in mockery—these are symptoms of health. Everything unconditional belongs to pathology*” (BGE 154)? Why say that men have been fleeing the fact that “*life is like a leaf in the wind, a plaything of nonsense, the senseless*” (GM3 28)? Why make the incredibly self-defeating observation that:

No matter how far a man may extend himself with his knowledge, no matter how objectively he may come to view himself, in the end it can yield to him nothing but his own biography (BGE 6)

We should, I think, not ignore Nietzsche’s constant insistence on the *disvalue* of knowledge, his repeated reminder not to “*unveil, uncover, and put into a bright light whatever is kept concealed for good reasons:*”

For there are some things we now know too well, we knowing ones: oh, how we nowadays learn as artists to forget well, to be good at not knowing! . . . (CW p198).

### **The *ad hominem* as a meta-Pyrrhonian argument**

As an alternative explanation of what constitutes Nietzsche’s methodological aim, Robert C. Solomon argues that we should focus our attention on his peculiar use of the *ad hominem* as a philosophical argument. Commonly defined as “the fallacy of attacking the person instead of the position,” such argument would usually be considered inadmissible. Yet Nietzsche refuses philosophical identification with Pyrrhonism on this very basis, for the main mistake of the Pyrrhonist lies not in his lack of “*rational integrity,*” but in his priestly “*weariness*” of belief (WP 221). The Pyrrhonist does not thereby make any theoretical mistake: he does not adhere to the wrong *belief*, but to the wrong *attitude*, for:

The multitude and disgregation of impulses and the lack of any systematic order among them result in a “weak will”; their coordination under a single predominant impulse results in a “strong will”: in the first case it is the oscillation and the lack of gravity; in the latter, the precision and clarity of the direction. (WP p28-29)



In this context, Solomon argues, it makes good sense for Nietzsche to make such extensive philosophical use of the *ad hominem*, for when it comes to personal health “the person and the philosopher are inextricably connected.” At the same time, however, there is a huge sense of methodological anomaly to what could be called Nietzsche’s *meta-Pyrrhonian* therapy. For in order to gain cognitive composure, one must first seem to undergo complete rational disintegration, a process during which Nietzsche refuses to lend his philosophical patients a helping hand. In order to bring about the envisioned attitude of *manly scepticism*, however, Nietzsche *is* willing to deny *himself* the positive acceptance of his own philosophical remarks as well. What does that mean? Would this not rather be an expression of “Nietzsche’s impending mental collapse,” his “euphoria, megalomania?”<sup>79</sup> Is “Nietzsche’s own practice at odds with his theory” here?<sup>80</sup> Ultimately, such questions are to be resisted: the most challenging exercise he saddles his philosophical interpreters up with is to withstand the very inclination to agree *or* disagree with him: all, of course, for the sake of their health.

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<sup>79</sup> Hollingdale, *Nietzsche: The Man and his Philosophy*, 5.

<sup>80</sup> Clark, *Nietzsche on Knowledge*, 12.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Early in my introduction, I posed some general questions about the curious reception history of philosophical scepticism. For if so widely regarded as rationally irrefutable, why would epistemists disallow it as an answer to the questions of knowledge? Barry Stroud's analysis is of great initial value, for he convincingly shows that Cartesian scepticism is usually rejected on the basis of an otherwise unsubstantiated trust in *ordinary* knowledge. External world scepticism, however, does not actually seem to undermine anyone's sense of intellectual security; Stroud cannot quite seem to establish what is the *significance* of philosophical scepticism.

In order to bring out the validity of philosophical doubt, I proposed to move away from Cartesian scepticism, and instead focus our philosophical attention on the *radical scepticism* of Sextus Empiricus and Friedrich Nietzsche, both of whom offer a comprehensive diagnosis of what constitutes the actual epistemic problem, and an alternative attitude towards what would be the solution. On Sextus Empiricus' account, philosophy was to provide guidance on the many existential questions bothering his ancient contemporaries. While these questions might have been of an ethical or metaphysical nature, philosophers can seem to warrant an affirmative answer only if an epistemological criterion of rational truth is established. Epistemological inquiry, however, merely yields a deeper sense of uncertainty as it cannot seem to answer some most urgent sceptical questions regarding the nature of intellectual inquiry itself. On Sextus' sceptical analysis, the ultimate problem of epistemology would consist in the *fickle character of human thought*. The Pyrrhonist thus seems to leave himself with an enormous problem regarding the validity of his very own ideas. Sextus, however, propounds a distinctly practical solution to this epistemic problem. Instead of further emphasising the need for rational reassurance, he invites his readers to embrace epistemic uncertainty as the only possible outcome of his inquiry. Pyrrhonism thus presents itself as an existential alternative to its philosophical neighbours, a philosophy that does not even allow itself its own firm sceptical convictions. Sextus' sceptical arguments instead serve a distinctly therapeutic purpose: they are meant to intensify philosophical doubt to the level of utter intellectual despair, causing in his readers an *intellectual catharsis*, a complete and final suspension of judgment. Pyrrhonian sceptics thereby achieve the very goal that Sextus' philosophical rivals fail to achieve: tranquillity

in all argumentative matters. Hence, Pyrrhonism provides an alternative route out of epistemic enquiry, by bringing into view the one assumption that is ordinarily left unchallenged in philosophy: the common misconception that one may only *value* a belief if its *truth* can be established rationally. The Pyrrhonist returns to ordinary life without as much as a clue as to what is true or false, yet has learned to *accept* rational *uncertainty* as an unavoidable fact of life.

However, Sextus cannot seem to explain why this embracement of ordinary belief would actually constitute an advisable *way of life*. An answer to this question might be found in Friedrich Nietzsche's *genealogy of knowledge*. Ordinary ideas, Nietzsche reveals, normally require our uncritical acceptance in order to serve their life-preserving purpose. However, that does not prove their truth or falsehood in any relevant philosophical sense. By exposing the actual psychological mechanism underlying belief-formation, Nietzsche shows that our concepts and classifications, even the structure of dialectical thought itself, are only formed in reaction to the unconscious uncertainty we feel when confronted with the relentless whirlwind of ordinary perception. Philosophers usually analyse the situation in an exact opposite way: by insisting on the inherent value of *true* belief they have actually brought about an unwarranted human *need* for intellectual certainty. If performed with rational integrity, however, their inquiry would merely unveil the idea of rational certainty as an illusion. In order to cope with this most daunting sceptical conclusion, Nietzsche advises his philosophical patients to cheerfully embrace our ordinary lies, while not forgetting their existential duty to resist resting assured and *create* proper meaning to life. In his self-ascribed role as a philosophical psychologist, he reveals to his readers the fundamental mechanisms underlying their own thinking, while hiding from plain sight his own exact beliefs. Methodologically speaking, the proper *attitude* here seems to *not* agree with him at any point; for Nietzsche might be fooling around with his interpreters, but only for their sake of their intellectual health.

## Comparison

As indicated in my introduction, the philosophical accounts of Sextus and Nietzsche share some important characteristics as diagnoses of the significance of philosophical

scepticism. Both emphasise the fine line leading from our ordinary need for rational certainty into the unhealthy realm of philosophical inquiry. Both regard philosophy not as the perfection of human reason but as stemming from our tacit overestimation of it. Both authors advocate their scepticism as a *therapy*, as an antidote, not to sceptical uncertainty itself, but to the unsubstantiated and untenable reverence of human reason that has caused us to disregard the *practical* values of our beliefs. The sceptic's *way of life* is characterised as a cheerful embracement of this inevitable fact. While employing arguments that might at first seem rationally self-refuting, Sextus and Nietzsche both emphasise the *practical* aim of their philosophical arguments, serving as mere argumentative tools in the service of their therapeutic message. Their main therapeutic aim is to bring out the futile nature of our quest for knowledge: both authors therefore demand from their patients a decisively sceptical attitude towards their own beliefs: the *significance* of radical scepticism thus lies *not* in its theoretical rigour, but in its capacity as an alternative to traditional philosophy, aiming first and foremost at a philosophically healthier *way of life*.

However, there are obvious differences between both forms of scepticism as well. For one, Sextus urges the reader to settle calmly for the set of beliefs that formerly constituted *ordinary knowledge*, and lures his dogmatic opponents by with the promise of their own ancient aim of tranquillity. Nietzsche on the other hand warns against such weary Pyrrhonism, urging that we should not settle for mere tranquillity but rather accept our artistic duty to find new goals to live for. Hence while Sextus still seems to appeal to a sense of meta-philosophical certainty, Nietzsche demands an even more flexible sceptical attitude. This main difference is meanly exemplified in the therapeutic methodology used: while Sextus goes to great lengths in order to inform his readers of his sceptical purposes, Nietzsche's confusing oeuvre nowhere contains an univocal statement of his intentions, or final verdict on the matter.

### **Verdict – or a complete lack of it**

What, then, should be regarded the significance of philosophical scepticism? Why would any epistemologist bother himself with the wildly existential aims of Sextus and Nietzsche? On my analysis, both sceptical accounts have their worth as an alternative

approach to philosophy, an alternative estimation of the role of human reason as a means towards an end. While contemporary epistemists boast their detached philosophical rigour in matters of argument, radical scepticism brings out the tacit assumptions underlying their quest for certainty. One might thus be tempted to argue that radical scepticism should be recognised for its intellectual honesty, for its ability to address the seemingly unanswerable questions of human reason itself. At the same time, however, it questions the very *value* of such attitude of intellectual honesty. This brings me to what can only be regarded the completely anomalous conclusion of this essay: in order for radical scepticism to have any significance, it must not be epistemologically advocated, nor be regarded a sustainable philosophical view. For if Sextus and Nietzsche were to *unconvince* their non-sceptical readers of the value of knowledge through sceptical argument, these readers would thereby be exposed to the dangers of epistemic despair. Unless Sextus and Nietzsche are somehow convinced of the universality of their therapeutic methods – which they sceptically can't – they should not wish to cause in their non-sceptical opponents the very illness they mean to provide a cure for. Hence as an epistemic diagnosis of truth, radical scepticism does not have any significance at all; as a therapeutic *way of life*, however, it may well contain some essential philosophical insights, even if we are not quite convinced of being sick.

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