

## SOME PROBLEMS IN THE HISTORY OF SKEPTICISM

Jim K. Swindler

Although it is an important tradition in Western philosophical thought, skepticism has for a number of reasons been perennially misunderstood, abused and ridiculed. To clarify what is fundamental to skeptical thought I wish to review the phases through which it has passed in its long growth and to bring its terrain into sharp focus by contrasting it with its nearest neighbors.

Just as speculative philosophy has something of a spiritual father in the figure of Socrates, skepticism is the direct descendant of the fourth century Greek philosopher, Pyrrho of Elis, hence the archaic use of "Pyrrhonism" as a synonym for "skepticism." Since we have none of Pyrrho's works, historians have had to rely upon testimony, especially from his disciple the satirist Timon of Phlius (whose works are only known in fragments), to determine what he believed and how he lived.<sup>1</sup> It seems necessary to consider the work of Pyrrho and Timon as a single philosophy. If a distinction is to be made, it is that Pyrrho was concerned to live the tranquillity he taught, while Timon, being more gregarious, seems to have delighted in engaging in being a "general railer" against "all dogmatic philosophers."<sup>2</sup>

Timon says that Pyrrho supposed three questions to be fundamental in philosophy.<sup>3</sup> The first is What is the nature of things? Pyrrho answered that the nature of reality is indeterminable and therefore cannot be known. This assertion seems to depend on the basic distinction between appearance and reality. Timon says, "I do not lay it down that honey is sweet, but I admit that it appears to be so."<sup>4</sup> The grounds for the assertion are human limitations. The senses reveal only appearances, reason distills to mere habit and prejudice. Having given up both, tampering of either by the other is lost as well. Knowledge is therefore impossible.

Pyrrho's second question is What is the proper attitude toward reality? Since all is indeterminable, the attempt to gain knowledge can only frustrate the seeker. We ought therefore to abstain from theoretical assertions and cultivate an attitude of indifference toward reality. He ought not to judge, allowing always that what appears may be the opposite of what is and that all assertions are but expressions of an individual's state of mind. The only proper attitude is epoche, suspension of judgment. Pyrrho's life serves as an agoge or exemplary mode of living. He

remained silent on metaphysical matters and led a life guided by the compulsion of his feelings, the tradition of laws and customs, the instruction of the arts and nature.

The third question Pyrrho asked was What is the value of adopting this attitude? The question was apparently answered by facts. Timon claims that ataraxia, mental tranquillity, follows inevitably upon the heels of epoche. Most speculation in Pyrrho's time concerned moral matters and Pyrrho too was primarily concerned with the summum bonum. Since knowledge is impossible knowledge of what conduces to real happiness is impossible. The only value left is to live undisturbed. By eliminating the possibility of knowledge, Pyrrho effectively terminated any inquiry into happiness and was left with the necessity of being satisfied without happiness, with only tranquillity. Since all was only indicative of states of mind, Pyrrho had to be content with what he felt was the least intolerable state of mind, ataraxia.

There are a number of problems involved in Pyrrho's philosophy which have continued to be sources of difficulty for skeptics up to the present. The first is the skeptic's paradox. If reality is indeterminable, that it is so is likewise indeterminable. It is impossible to know that knowledge is impossible. If we ought to abstain from theoretical assertion, we ought not to assert that we ought so to abstain, for such a normative assertion is theoretical. Even if ataraxia did overcome Pyrrho and Timon, what assurance is there that epoche will yield the same result for anyone else? If knowledge is impossible, how can I know that Pyrrho's agoge will serve me as well as it did him? And how is a completely conservative life possible, since there seem to be conflicting inclinations, times of political transition, and opposing natural forces? To these problems the earliest Pyrrhonists gave no resolution, and this in turn caused a certain cynical attitude toward skepticism on the part of non-skeptics and resulted ultimately in moderation of the claims of later skeptics.

Pyrrho claimed also that once ataraxia is achieved there is no longer any desire to ask the questions that gave rise to it. The questions and their answers simply fade from awareness as tranquillity sets in. This gave rise to the favorite analogy of ancient and renaissance skeptics, that between skepticism on the one hand and purgative medicines on the other. In early Greek medicine disease was thought to be an imbalance in the humours of the body,<sup>5</sup> just as philosophical puzzlement was taken by Pyrrho to be a disturbance caused by a desire to know that was too great to be satisfied by the reality that was to be known. The remedy for disease was to restore the balance of humours by purging the body of those in excess. Pyrrho's remedy for the disease of philosophy was to purge the mind of the desire to know. And, just as the purgative eliminates itself along with the excess humours, so the theory that knowledge of reality is impossible was supposed to cure the desire to know reality and likewise terminate belief in

in the theory that knowledge is impossible, which was supposed to bring the soul to *ataraxia*. This analogy is significant first because it has furnished skeptics with a conception of themselves as physicians treating philosophers as patients and second because it points to a fundamental difficulty with which skeptics have had to contend, the problem of identifying dogma without catching themselves in dogmatic assertion. It will be more convenient to raise this problem in the context of Wittgenstein's philosophy.

After Timon, Pyrrhonism seems to have died out,<sup>6</sup> and was not revived until Aenesidemus of Knossos constructed the first theoretical formulation about 43 B.C. at Alexandria.<sup>7</sup> Apparently, for Aenesidemus, Pyrrhonism was only the first step to Heracliteanism.<sup>8</sup> But along the way he produced ten *tropoi* or modes of argument that were designed to combat dogmatism with relativism and eight that attacked aetiologies or theories of causation. There is nothing, in the first ten tropes that is particularly new or devastating,<sup>9</sup> for they all have to do with ways the senses may be deceived. His eight tropes on causation show considerable insight and may have been the high water mark in ancient thought on the subject. The first comes close to Hume's realization that, search as we might, the connection between events that we call cause forever eludes us. Beyond this, Aenesidemus argued against the Academics Arcesilaus and Carneades, that if there is no criterion for the truth then there is no criterion for the probable either. He seems also to have believed that the end of philosophy was *ataraxia* and that *epoche* was the only means to that end. Very little else of certainty is known of Aenesidemus.

If Pyrrho was the spiritual father of skepticism, Sextus Empiricus is the best representative of the first true skeptics. For he was, so far as history reveals it, the first philosopher to assemble a sufficient number of the pieces of the logical puzzle which Pyrrho and Timon had left to approach the critical balance required to sustain the skeptical stance. Sextus is to skepticism as Euclid is to geometry; he was an assembler and systematizer. His major work is a compendium of techniques and arguments (*tropoi*) designed to dissolve dogmatism in general and Stoicism in particular. He attributed eighteen of his twenty-five tropes to Aenesidemus and the rest to other more or less known skeptics. But in Sextus' works we have what must be taken as the definitive statement of the last and culminating phase of Pyrrhonian skepticism.

According to Sextus, "Skepticism is an ability, or mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgments in any way whatever, with the result that, owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought firstly to a state of mental suspense, and next to a state 'of unperturbedness' or quietude."<sup>10</sup> He abstains from distinguishing appearance from reality as Pyrrho did, instead he opposes appearance (sense perceptions or phenomena) to theories about reality. In this way he avoids at least one of Pyrrho's entanglements in the skeptic's paradox. He retains the goal of skepticism as Pyrrho saw it,

suspension of judgment and mental tranquillity. He therefore escapes the epistemological while nevertheless refusing to deal with the ethical paradox. But Sextus' definition has the double virtue of delineating skepticism as a response to dogmatic philosophy and showing the notion of 'skeptical doctrine' to be a contradiction in terms. Failure to understand these points has contributed to the common misunderstanding of skepticism.

At the heart of Sextus' work is the notion of balancing the sides of the scale of argument. He says that the fundamental principle of skepticism "is that of opposing to every proposition an equal proposition," (p. 9) one with weight enough to cancel the effect of the other. How is it that the skeptic is able to determine the real weights of arguments and appearances in order to balance the scale? The answer is that he need only rely upon the appearance of weight in appearances and arguments, for he is dealing only with relative weights and his goal is not 'the truth' but *epoche* and *ataraxia*. With regard to the dogmatist, Sextus is only concerned to show him enough weight in counter-arguments and examples from experience to shake his faith in his own assertions, the assumption being that dogmatic theories are more inadequate than wrong. Sextus therefore accepts as his groundwork a sort of naive realism: "our doubt does not concern the appearance itself but the account given of that appearance" (p. 12). Much misplaced criticism has resulted from the erroneous belief that skeptics doubt the experiences we should rightly call ordinary. But skeptics acknowledge their humanity and so Sextus sometimes counters mere assertion with what he takes to be facts. The use of 'facts' to show the inadequacy of philosophical theories has been called the 'method of reminders' and is complimented in Sextus' arsenal by what I shall call the method of 'tit for tat,' and further by the method of opposing facts with counter-facts. By 'tit for tat' I mean the contravention of a theory by the production of an opposite theory which will appear equal in weight. Sextus says, "We oppose appearances to appearances, or objects of thought to objects of thought or *alternando*" (p. 23). To catalogue the workings of these methods, he gives his twenty-five modes of argument and recommends the use of nine "formulae" or phrases which succinctly express skeptical moves. There are in his compendium few surprises, for Sextus' modes have been adopted by philosophers of all sorts for centuries to criticize the thought of their opponents. Sextus himself disclaims knowledge of their validity (pp. 23-25) and points out that they can be used to cancel themselves (p. 15). The arguments all have specific targets among the dogmatic theories of Sextus' contemporaries and should not be taken as theoretical assertions of skeptical doctrine. For example, it is wrong to conclude from mode number eight, which is an argument for general relativism, that Sextus is a relativist in the dogmatic sense. Sextus' goal is not merely to win arguments. He wants dogmatists to recognize the futility of theorising and to see them return to living ordinary lives guided by customs, law, the compulsion of feelings, and nature. They will thus be able to live as tranquilly as possible under whatever conditions obtain and they will not be compelled by what is "non-evident" (pp. 19-21).

That Sextus held epoche to be the summum bonum seems clear in spite of his occasional denials.<sup>11</sup> The end of skepticism is ataraxia, the means is epoche, and in practice it consists in using the modes and formulas and living a conservative life (p. 17). One of the problems with Pyrrho's philosophy was that he had reasoned, too hastily, from the impossibility of knowledge to the assertion that we should not seek it. Sextus, on the other hand, wisely refrains from the epistemological claim. But in so doing he gave up his basic premise, leaving himself holding a dangling conclusion without the argument to which it belonged. Unless it is asserted that knowledge is impossible, there is no reason for suspending judgment or for seeking ataraxia. Of the tripartite Pyrrhonian skepticism, Sextus explicitly retained the ethical second and third parts, epoche and ataraxia. But, even though there is as much paradox in each of these as there was in the epistemological, Sextus' overthrow of the Pyrrhonian belief in the impossibility of knowledge should be considered a purification of skepticism. Even so, there is another criticism that can be made. Sextus' recognition that he must avoid the skeptic's paradox at all costs is itself indicative that he believes that paradox to be real and true, which means that, despite his claim that appearance is the only skeptical criterion (p. 16) he holds consistency to be yet higher.

Skepticism died out after Sextus and was not revived until Wittgenstein re-entered philosophy, after an absence of several years, in 1929. Even though it is often difficult to state Wittgenstein's arguments or to see the target of his thought, just as with Sextus, the particulars are only temporarily important. As soon as they have performed their purgative function, they carry themselves away en masse. There are, however, several powerful currents in Wittgenstein's thought which correspond to those in Sextus'. The first is the intellectually hypnotising power of theoretical pictures of reality. The cure for this sort of blindness is to return to our ordinary uses of language. So we encounter the Wittgensteinian use of the 'method of reminders,' the object of which is to shatter the dogmatist's belief in a single reality corresponding to some word or phrase that is then used in some significant way in his philosophical theories. "My aim is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense."<sup>12</sup> To this end, he employs his so-called "use theory of meaning." He says, "For a large class of classes-- though not for all--in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language." (p. 20<sup>e</sup>) Throughout his later writings (post 1929) he therefore directs philosophers' attention to the ways words are actually used in the language we speak.

Likewise, we find him using the method of "tit for tat" with the object of shaking dogmatic belief in theories while carefully avoiding merely replacing one theory with another equally as inadequate. Thus he counters Cartesian mind/body dualism with the so-called "private language argument." Out of Wittgenstein's apparently rambling remarks the argument may be interpreted as three successive syllogisms:

- I. 1. To obey a rule is to follow a custom, it is a practice. (Philosophical Investigations (hereafter P.I.), I, 199, 202)
2. It is possible to be mistaken in believing that one is obeying a rule only because one's practice exhibits that one is wrong. (P. I., I, 201, 202)
- II. ∴ 1. It is not possible to obey a rule privately because there is no practice to use as criterion in such a case. (P.I., I, 202, 258)
2. To use a word meaningfully is to obey a rule for its use in a language. (P.I., I, 43)
- III. ∴ 1. One cannot use a word meaningfully privately (P.I., I, 258, 260)
2. To have a private language is to use words meaningfully and privately. (P.I., I, 243)
- ∴ A private language is not possible. (P.I., I, 258)

Wittgenstein does not deny the existence of the Cartesian private world, he is only showing that it is not possible to speak meaningfully wholly within such a world. The conclusion of the argument is that human beings are something like what P. F. Strawson refers to technically as "persons," "a type of entity such that both predicates ascribing states of consciousness and predicates ascribing corporeal characteristics, a physical situation, etc. are equally applicable to a single individual of that type." And, since a private language is impossible and persons use language, it makes no sense to speak of people as dualistic entities whose expressions are ineffable because utterly private. For present purposes it is sufficient to notice that, if using a word correctly means following the rule of its usage, then language must consist in a system of rules by which it is possible to determine the correctness of any particular use of a word. Wittgenstein never makes such a claim; but this essentialist conception of the nature of language constitutes an unstated premise of the private language argument and amounts to the assertion that both the rules of a language and the language itself must be public. But by avoiding such a definition of language Wittgenstein, unlike Strawson, avoids committing himself to the truth of the conclusion and therefore the skeptic's paradox.

Wittgenstein also uses Sextus' method of opposing "facts" with "facts," but he does it in the process of analysing language instead of physical objects. For example, he reminds us of the usual meaning attached to the predicates of such phrases as "there is a tree over there" in contrast to the meaning philosophers attach to phrases like "there is an essence of number." Such reminders are directed at pointing out the distinction between the "depth" and "surface" grammar of words like "is." The similarity of sentential uses of such words gives rise to the belief that they are conceptually all the same, and this trains us to see and use them the same way in and out of philosophy. "Our problem," he says, "is not

a causal but a conceptual one" (P.I. p. 203e). "A main cause of philosophical disease is a one sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example " (P.I., p. 155e).

At times Wittgenstein uses specific modes of argument that are virtually identical to those of Sextus. One major theme of the Investigations is the notion of "forms of life" to which all thought, all speech, indeed all sentient existence, are relative. A being's form of life determines what is necessary for it, e.g.,  $1+1=2$  necessarily for us. But "if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones, and that having different ones would mean not realizing something that we realize--then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him" (P.I. 203e). Thus the argument for extreme relativism that turned up in Sextus' eighth mode and elsewhere turns up in Wittgenstein's work, but altered so that it confronts modern rather than ancient dogmatists. A being's form of life functions as a source of possible systematic deception. It is then a generalized conception of notions like Descartes' "demon hypothesis," and the possibility which Aenesidemus raised (and that Montaigne introduced into the modern world<sup>14</sup>) that we may need faculties utterly different from any we possess to apprehend reality. The whole matter is put neatly by Montaigne, "Thou seest nothing but the order and regulation of this little vault wherein thou art lodged--if thou dost see so much . . ." (p. 252). Substituting any conception that is sufficient to disrupt any particular theory of reality for Montaigne's "vault," this mode of argument is at once the most general and the most powerful of skeptical weapons. For it relies upon there being any faint possibility that a philosopher's criterion for truth may be wrong, which means that the philosopher's imagination is pitted against itself, and how could it but lose? To illustrate, most of us seem to believe that the basics of arithmetic would necessarily hold in all possible worlds. But consider: Would a set of conditions under which  $2+2=4$  had no application whatever be the same as ours in its metaphysical features? No answer can be given unless those conditions are described, but notice, it is not necessary to describe the conditions of some other world to introduce the possibility that we may be systematically deluded in this one.

Perhaps the most original of Wittgenstein's techniques is his use of "family resemblances" to counter essentialist arguments. The anti-essentialism of Sextus shows up mainly in his first ten modes where he argues from relativism. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, is willing to allow that there appears to be some commonality in some objects of experience and some concepts, which leads the dogmatist to assert that they are essentially the same. But essentiality is too great a claim for a skeptic. So, after reminding us of the variety of uses for the word "language" (which he develops by using the device of "language games"), Wittgenstein says,

Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying that these phenomena have no one thing

in common which makes us use the same word for all,-- but that they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all 'language' . . . I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances;' for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way (P.I., pp. 31e-32e).

And just as what constitutes relations between members of a family depends upon the culture the family is in, so when we think we find essential qualities that define real classes, the qualities we find and the ones we call essential depend upon our condition, especially when raised to the level of forms of life.

What even more fundamentally links Sextus and Wittgenstein than the techniques they use is the use they make of their techniques. For it is obvious that the techniques and even some of the arguments they use have been used by philosophers who are not skeptics. I shall shortly discuss a few such philosophers, but first we should get clear about Sextus' and Wittgenstein's reasons for doing philosophy. Sextus admits that the Pyrrhonians began by seeking the truth. But, when frustration followed on frustration and they realized that it always had, they resolved not to theorize. A marvelous thing happened, "they found that quietude, as if by chance, followed upon their suspense (of judgment), even as a shadow follows its substance."<sup>15</sup> And Wittgenstein has said that his object in philosophy was to "show the fly the way out of the bottle" (P.I., p. 103e), to bring philosophers to the point where they can quit philosophizing because they are no longer in quandaries over philosophical puzzles, to cure the disease of philosophy. There is implicit in both the Pyrrhonian and the Wittgensteinian discovery of the tranquilizing effect of being satisfied with the ordinary and the evident, a very deep humility. It is this humility that sets skepticism most sharply in contrast with dogmatism of all sorts. It is this humility that makes ordinary men seem "civilized" to Wittgenstein and it is the belief that they know that makes philosophers seem "primitive."

But search all you wish, you will find in Wittgenstein's work no such normative principles as Pyrrho and Sextus give. Wittgenstein claims neither a conservative nor a liberal life to be best. In a certain sense we cannot help but follow nature (our form of life) so there is no point in making that an ethical imperative either. And anyway, he only uses forms of life to jostle dogmatic belief. All Wittgenstein retains of the original Pyrrhonian skepticism in its positive aspect is belief in the futility, in fact the positive harmfulness, of believing in the truth of the theories we create. He doesn't have anything against theorizing, after all that is an integral part of the skeptical enterprise. But there is only frustration to be gained from believing that reality has been understood, that it has been snared by a theory.

This may be taken as a normative claim: One ought not to believe. But for Wittgenstein it is strictly analogous to a doctor telling a patient not to overeat or to add such and such to his diet. From one perspective it is possible to trap Wittgenstein in the skeptic's paradox only if one assumes that it is necessary to call a disease bad to identify it as a disease; but, given the utterly naive realism Sextus and Wittgenstein seem to adopt, this objection is impotent because all they need and all they claim is the appearance of disease, the principal symptom of which is the desire to know reality. On the other hand, whether Sextus and Wittgenstein have really identified a disease is somewhat beside the point, for they are ready to call one condition better than another, ataraxia better than wonder, and to prescribe their cure, epoche or the giving up of philosophy. To be ready to identify and cure a disease they must use some notion of what constitutes health and in both cases they have judged an attitude somewhere between atheoretical and apathetic to be healthy. Their philosophy is entirely informed by the judgment that doubt is superior to belief in philosophical matters. And like flies caught in a spider's web, the more they squirm, the more entangled they become in their own paradox.

At any rate, the history of skepticism, properly so-called, displays a gradual diminution of principles from Pyrrho and Timon's three, that knowledge is impossible, that one ought to practice epoche, and that the reward is ataraxia; to Aenesidemus and Sextus' two, that one ought to suspend judgment and that tranquillity will result; to Wittgenstein's implicit one, that one ought not to believe philosophical theories. But methodologically the movement has remained quite constant. In general all the methods of skepticism turn on the contention that no criterion for judging theoretical claims to be true has been found. The matter may be taken one step further. Not only is there no way of telling when we should affirm that an assertion is the truth, there is likewise no criterion for determining when it is appropriate to doubt. Wittgenstein says in response to a doubt that "that is a tree over there," "My finding it beyond doubt is not what counts. If a doubt would be reasonable that cannot be seen from what I hold. There would therefore have to be a rule that declares doubt to be unreasonable here. But there isn't such a rule either."<sup>16</sup> He even goes so far as to claim, "What criterion do you use then? None at all."<sup>17</sup> If Sextus and Wittgenstein had been completely consistent, they could both have made this claim. As it is, Wittgenstein can only make it as a personal claim which he violates in dialectic and Sextus can make it not at all. I believe that we have here, at last, the core of skepticism. For all the modes of argument, all the ranting about philosophical disease come down at last to this: a skeptic can accept no criterion of truth whatsoever. While its actual activity must always be in response to some particular doctrine, the attitude that informs skepticism must be both personal and universal. At its heart, it is this awareness of the lack of criteria that distinguishes true skepticism from philosophies of other sorts, including two that are sometimes called skeptical which I wish now to consider.

The first of these is nearly as old as skepticism itself, and is still controversial today. I am speaking of academic or "mitigated" skepticism. This philosophy arose in the Academy of Plato in the third and second centuries B.C., its two strongest proponents being Arcesilaus and Carneades.<sup>18</sup> Their arguments were directed mainly against the Stoics who claimed that some perceptions are infallible and that these display their infallibility by "signs" that are peculiar to them. The academic skeptics argued that there is no criterion for distinguishing fallible from infallible perceptions, that the "signs" were bogus.<sup>19</sup> But then they went on to hold that even though we lack adequate criteria for knowing the truth, we can make reasonable and probable claims. Arcesilaus developed the notion of the eulogon, or what appeals to reason, as the true and the right. He accepted it that the best a man can do is what seems to be most reasonable. In practice, it was a matter of weighing arguments which, as I pointed out, the true skeptic realizes he cannot do. Carneades, on the other hand, worked out the idea of the pithanon, or probable, as a criterion for judging perceptions. He does recommend suspension of judgment on the truth of perceptions, but he also maintains that they manifest three degrees of probability depending on how much of an obstacle they present to belief. Such notions obviously depend on their being criteria for judging the degree of probability to be assigned as well as the validity of the probability structure in which they are assigned. Arcesilaus and Carneades seem not to have been concerned about their rash substitution of the eulogon and the pithanon for dogmatists' claims to knowledge. They seem to have been more concerned to provide a theoretical foundation for practical living, having been intimidated by the criticism that skepticism leads to inaction. They both seem to have lost sight of the Pyrrhonian goal of ataraxia (though, to be fair, Arcesilaus at least seems to have tried to cultivate suspension of judgment) which includes cessation of the desire to ask philosophical questions. In losing sight of this goal they mitigated their skepticism, but to mitigate skepticism is to fall into the skeptic's paradox, it is to claim knowledge of criteria and ultimate ignorance. Significantly, it was Aenesidemus who first made this criticism of the academics and it was his work that led to the more thorough-going skepticism of Sextus Emiricus.

In modern times the chief spokesman for mitigated skepticism has been David Hume. Perhaps the strongest skeptical argument he gives is one related directly to Carneades' pithanon. Instead of each successive judgment building a higher probability of truth as Carneades thought, Hume says that to judge is to enter on an infinite sequence of judgments, each of which,

tho' it shou'd be favorable to our preceeding judgment, being founded only on probability, must weaken still further our first evidence and must itself be weaken'd by a fourth doubt of the same kind, and so on in infinitum; till at last there remain nothing of the original probability, however great we may suppose it to have been, and however small the diminution by every new uncertainty.<sup>20</sup>

But he overthrows this devastating conclusion when he adds, "even after all we retain a degree of belief . . . (because the action of the mind described above) becomes forc'd and unnatural, and the ideas faint and obscure . . . the same ideas have not the same effect as in a more natural conception of the ideas " (p. 37). What is "natural" to us saves us from being inactivated by doubt.

Hume implicitly accepts a phenomenological criterion when he proceeds to dissolve the self and causation by similar arguments. In both cases he must assume a position beyond his phenomenal self to decide that there is nothing but his phenomenal self and that what he calls his self is nothing but a series of impressions which are not connected causally. What Hume relies on is phenomenological thought experiment. In searching after a certain standard, he has turned inward toward buried experience and, finding nothing there, decides that nothing is there is reality. But, as Wittgenstein puts it, "it is easier to bury a problem than to solve it " (P.I., p. 112e). There could hardly be a clearer example of philosophical results following from philosophical method. Like Sextus, Hume accepts mere appearance as his standard for judgment, and even though, as Popkin suggests,<sup>21</sup> Hume may want the arguments only to overcome Descartes' *cogito* and then to purge themselves away as well, we are left to judge the force of the arguments by the standards they assume. Since the standard there in question is what appears to one individual (albeit a remarkable one) at a particular time and place under some particular conditions, the conclusions seem dubious. If we are to accept such a standard, the fool is as much to be believed as the philosopher and, if Hume is right about the conditioning we suffer from "nature," there is no reason to expect much agreement on the results of any such inquiry between thinkers living under diverse conditions.

Having to his satisfaction destroyed whole realms of inquiry, Hume confesses that his intention "is only to make the reader sensible of the truth of my hypothesis, that all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are deriv'd from nothing but customs; and that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures " (p. 183). This recalls Arcesilaus' denial of the criticism that skepticism leads to immobility on grounds that the will acts without confirmation of thought and without unshakeable belief.<sup>22</sup> And, like the academics, Hume holds that passion, based on custom and habit, in other words, what seems reasonable and probable and offers the least obstruction to belief, is the proper guide to life. It is not so important that in the conflict between his theoretical skepticism and his recommendation of belief in causation, the efficacy of reason, the existence of the self, etc. (which causes him to squirm a great deal), it is not so important that in this conflict, he is caught (perhaps willingly) in the skeptic's paradox. What is important, and what fundamentally distinguishes Hume from true skepticism, is his goal. He has a vision of reality he wishes to bring people to believe. Granted, he uses skeptical arguments to gain his end. But that alone is insufficient. Pyrrhonism aims at ataraxia,

which implies cessation of the desire to know the answers to philosophical questions. Hume, on the other hand, holds that we cannot help but do what is "natural" to us and hence we cannot cease philosophizing. But even if we admit Hume as the "consistent Pyrrhonist" that Popkin argues he is,<sup>23</sup> he is still an inconsistent skeptic. For he believes in the ultimate sway of "nature" and proceeds to construct an elaborate theory of what constitutes "human nature." It is no accident that the phrase is prominent in the title of his principal work.

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which Hume followed the trail cleared by Pyrrho. Pyrrho and Sextus recommended a life lived in accordance with nature and the compulsion of the feelings. They, like Hume, seem to have believed that there is no alternative. Once they saw that neither reason nor the senses could be adequate guides, they turned to irrational, dumb natural forces. In form this move is not unlike the critical "leap of faith" in fideistic systems, the main difference being that it is secular, it makes no reference to God. But the role played by nature in Pyrrhonism and mitigated skepticism, i.e. secular fideism, is the same role played by God in theistic fideism. They are both the ultimate conditioning force, the ultimate criterion. It is just here that we can see the force of true skepticism most clearly. Wittgenstein's notion of forms of life served as the ultimate conditioning force in just the way that God and nature do in theistic and secular fideism. But his point was that whatever is taken to constitute our form of life, whether God, nature, or evil demon, we are by that very condition barred from ever seeing beyond it. If we once accept a criterion of truth, that very act of acceptance precludes the possibility of finding unconditioned truth, which, after all, is the goal of philosophy. In consequence, for example, no ontological argument is ultimately believable because for any entity that is conceived to necessarily exist, it is possible to conceive some condition that necessitates that result, for instance that logic requires a metaphysical first principle, and once having grasped such a condition, the necessity of the conclusion reached on grounds of the condition becomes disconnected from the ultimate unconditioned conclusion. The one further point, which is the fideistic conclusion, is that acceptance of a criterion, an ultimate conditioning force, is a matter of faith. The difference between true skepticism and either sort of fideism is that the skeptic has refused to make the "leap of faith," he has refused to commit himself to a truth he is unable to believe. He has therefore kept open every possibility that was before him, while fideism has closed them off.

Theistic fideism is a peculiarly Christian phenomenon, perhaps because Christianity is a religion amenable to philosophical inquiry. It is also a peculiarly modern phenomenon, having arisen as a widely held doctrine only after the work of Sextus was re-introduced in the early sixteenth century and popularized by Montaigne in the 1580's. In his "Apology for Raymond de Sebonde," Montaigne used most of the tropoi of the ancient skeptics, Meno's paradox and considerable wit and grace of style to undermine

rational and experiential knowledge.<sup>24</sup> Then he went on to claim that this ruinous Pyrrhonism was in reality the only true preparation of the soul for divine illumination and that the Pyrrhonists' demand for conservative life would lead people who had seen the force of skepticism back into the arms of mother church. This form of fideism reached its culmination in the work of Pierre Bayle at the close of the seventeenth century. In his Dictionary, which was avidly read by David Hume,<sup>25</sup> Bayle makes use of virtually every skeptical gambit to be found anywhere before him and he appears to have invented some of his own, e.g., that a statement may be both self-evident and false.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps his favorite weapon is the technique of pushing claims to their logical extreme to show their absurdity. After he has logically refuted his opponents' doctrines, he goes on in several instances to claim that since reason is incapable of attaining knowledge, we must look at faith for the way out of skeptical dissolution. Following Montaigne, he welcomes Pyrrhonism as the philosophy most receptive to Christian faith because it not only dissolves everyone else's reason, it must dissolve its own. "The natural conclusion of this ought to be to renounce this guide and to implore the cause of all things to give us a better one . . . A man is therefore happily disposed toward faith when he knows how defective reason is" (pp. 205-206). Since Montaigne and Bayle obviously sought to destroy reason merely for the sake of religion, it is clear that they retained the desire to know the answers to philosophical questions, the only change being that the Christian God replaced reflection as the source of knowledge. This is in clear contradiction to the Pyrrhonian goal of ataraxia, a state which implies the cessation of the desire to know. Bayle and Montaigne seem also to mistake the target of skepticism. They believed it to be reason, when in fact it is faith in dogmatic assertions.

As Popkin has pointed out,<sup>26</sup> there is in Bayle's Dictionary a noticeable lack of the religious fervor we find in fideists like Pascal. It is important to set Bayle's calm critical attitude along side the zealous passion of existentialist fideists, for it is apparent from this (as well as from the testimony of Sextus<sup>15</sup>) that despair is not a necessary consequence of skeptical dissolution of belief. Kierkegaard is perhaps the best example of really passionate fideism. True to the fideist form, Kierkegaard used a whole range of standard skeptical techniques against the prevailing dogmatism of his time, Hegelianism. He reminds us again and again of the incompleteness of the Hegelian System and juxtaposes this with what he believes to be the necessity for ethical commitment that the incompleteness of the Hegelian System renders impossible. He makes the general claim that philosophy cannot produce knowledge of reality because the only reality that counts, Christ and the individual's relation to Him, is essentially absurd.<sup>27</sup> Recognizing this, the individual is thrust immediately into despair, a disease for which Kierkegaard provides the remedy, the notorious "leap of faith," total commitment to live according to the dictates of the subjective relationship with God. It is impossible to construe Kierkegaard as a true skeptic because of this doctrine of commitment. Either one accepts God in all His absurdity/Or one is lost

in sin and despair. It is fundamental to true skepticism that there be a suspension of judgment and abstention from belief. The despair that so vitally concerns Kierkegaard is a symptom of his unwillingness to give up his desire for absolute truth after skepticism has produced conviction of its futility. This involves the two fundamental mistakes of fideism, whether secular or theistic. The first is believing on theoretical grounds that truth in any usual sense is impossible, which involves the skeptic's paradox. The second is believing that we ought to be able to acquire truth anyway. The result is acceptance of the absurd or the irrational as the truth.

These examples of fideism reveal another important feature of skepticism. More than any other philosophy, skepticism is an attack upon faith. The opponent of skeptical argument is always dogmatism. Fideists and mitigated skeptics fail to be true skeptics because they fail to turn the full strength of their skepticism on their own dogmas. They are therefore caught at the outset in the skeptic's paradox. But more importantly, these philosophers do not aim at ataraxia in the full sense of no longer desiring to know. Rather, they aim at some personal relationship with God or they adhere to some subjective sophistical standard. They miss what amounts to the essential insight of skepticism, that all skeptical activity is negative, that the skeptic only doubts and that doubt is an utterly vacuous, an utterly neutral, condition, not giving rise to any positive assertion at all. The skeptic is like some super-hard metal against which bullets of doctrine are fired, but which, being impervious to their force, only ricochets them back into the minds in which they were forged. The true skeptic is no more than a gadfly, always tormenting believers, but never being caught by the hand of faith.

University of Kansas

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Eward Zeller, The Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics, trans. Oswald J. Reichel (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), pp. 519-20.

<sup>2</sup>Norman Maccoll, The Greek Sceptics from Pyrrho to Sextus (London: MacMillan & Co., 1869), p. 30.

<sup>3</sup>Zeller, op. cit., pp. 521-27. Maccoll, op. cit., pp. 21ff. Philip P. Hallie, Scepticism, Man and God. Selections from the Major Writings of Sextus Empiricus (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1964), Introduction.

<sup>4</sup>Hallie, ibid., p. 16.

<sup>5</sup>Marshall Clagett, Greek Science in Antiquity (London: Collier Books, 1969), p. 55.

<sup>6</sup>Zeller, op. cit., pp. 520-21.

<sup>7</sup>Frederick Copleston, S. J., A History of Philosophy, vol. I, part II (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1962), p. 187.

<sup>8</sup>Maccoll, op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>10</sup>Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism, trans. R. G. Bury (New York: Loeb Classical Library, 1933), I, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup>Arguing against Arcesilaus, Sextus says, "whereas we make these statements [that the end is epoche and that it is accompanied by ataraxia] not positively but in accordance with what appears to us, he makes them as statements of real facts . . ." ibid., p. 143.

<sup>12</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, Basil Blackwell & Mott, 1958), p. 133e.

<sup>13</sup>P. F. Strawson, "Persons," The Philosophy of Mind, ed. V. C. Chappell (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1962), p. 135.

<sup>14</sup>Michel de Montaigne, "apology for Raimond De Sebonde," Essays, II, 12, trans. Charles Cotton, ed. W. Carew Hazlitt (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1952), p. 287.

<sup>15</sup>Sextus, op. cit., p. 21.

<sup>16</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, On Certainty, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 59e.

<sup>17</sup>Ludwig Wittgenstein, Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, G. E. M. Anscombe (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1967), p. 184e.

<sup>18</sup>Zeller, op. cit., pp. 528-62. Hallie, op. cit., pp. 17-24. Copleston, op. cit., pp. 158-61. Mary Mills Patrick, The Greek Skeptics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1929), pp. 31-197.

<sup>19</sup>This controversy shows striking resemblance to that between Descartes and Gassendi over the infallibility of 'clearness' and 'distinctness' as criteria for the truth.

<sup>20</sup>David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L. A. Selby-Biggs (Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 182.

<sup>21</sup>Richard Popkin, "David Hume: His Pyrrhonism and His Critique of Pyrrhonism," Hume, ed. V. C. Chappell (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1966), p. 53ff.

<sup>22</sup>Zeller, op. cit., p. 534.

<sup>23</sup>Popkin, op. cit., pp. 53-98.

<sup>24</sup>Montaigne, op. cit., pp. 208-94. Also, Richard H. Popkin, The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes (Assen: Van Gorcum & Co., 1960), pp. 44-60.

<sup>25</sup>Richard H. Popkin, "Skepticism," in Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards, (New York: MacMillan & The Free Press, 1967), p. 455.

<sup>26</sup>Pierre Bayle, "Pyrrho," in Historical and Critical Dictionary, Selections, trans. Richard H. Popkin & Craig Brush (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965), pp. 199-203. Also, Richard H. Popkin, "The High Road to Pyrrhonism," American Philosophical Quarterly, 2 (1965), p. 27. It should be remarked that the type of statements Bayle considers self-evident are such as "things which are not different from a third thing are not different from each other," and the demonstrations of their falsehood are such as "the mystery of the Trinity." Even though it is obvious from a secular philosophical point of view that these arguments show nothing because they rely upon accepting Church dogmas, it is also clear that Bayle is here in the Pyrrhonian tradition of using arguments only as strong as necessary to upset given claims by using the standard the claimant sets for himself.



<sup>26</sup>Ibid., footnote, p. 206.

<sup>27</sup>Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 188.

## THE MEAN

K. L. Helstrom

Considering the place of virtue in Aristotle's ethics, it is important both to clarify the notion of the mean and to determine how its connection to virtue adds clarification to the notion of virtue itself. There are two different interpretations of the mean that might be drawn from Aristotle's writings. The first, though seeming to be the most natural, is an implausible interpretation and one to which Aristotle himself is not committed. The second, for the most part implicit in the discussion, escapes the most obvious difficulties that confront the first but leads to further difficulties. But if the notion of the mean remains somewhat obscure, then nothing has been gained by the definition of virtue in terms of the mean.

Assuming that to aim toward the mean is characteristic of virtue, two distinct questions arise for any proposed interpretation of the mean. First, for any virtuous action is it always true that it has the properties required by the interpretation? Second, if we are perplexed about whether a certain action is virtuous or not, will the mean as so interpreted provide a criterion for resolving this perplexity? Any definition of virtue must give practical criteria for assessing particular actions or passions; it must be not only theoretically correct but also materially adequate. This point needs to be emphasized, since ethics is for Aristotle a practical science. To be able to aim at virtue, which is the essence of the moral life, requires that one be able to judge the virtue of alternative courses of action. Thus these two questions provide an adequate test for any interpretation of the mean.

The first interpretation is that of the mathematical sense of mean, for which the differences between virtues and vices will be matters of degree. One characteristic of virtue that Aristotle cites is to be "destroyed by excess and defect and preserved by the mean" (N.E., 1104a25). This terminology of excess, defect, and mean naturally suggests this type of interpretation. Reinforcement is found in Aristotle's treatment of justice, particularly of corrective justice. At several points in the Politics and Nichomachean Ethics, he indicates a connection between justice and the mean,<sup>1</sup> so that one needs only to notice the mathematical model in terms of which justice is analyzed to derive a strong presumption for an analogous interpretation of the mean.

Can a plausible case, which is consistent with the Nichomachean Ethics, be made for such an interpretation? That it cannot should be evident from seeking an answer to the second question above. Against the determination of the virtues by seeking some sort of mathematical mean, four, not necessarily