

Skeptical Philosophy: Between Inquiry and Suspension

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Introduction

My focus is on Pyrrhonian skepticism. So, by “skepticism,” I mean ancient Pyrrhonian skepticism as represented by Sextus Empiricus.

The problem:

- Sextus says that skepticism is philosophy;
- more than that, he claims that skeptical philosophy is superior to other kinds of philosophy, which he calls “dogmatist” or “doctrinal” philosophy;
- sometimes he even suggests that only Pyrrhonian skepticism is real philosophy.

What exactly is skeptical philosophy? What distinguishes skeptical philosophy from other kinds of philosophy, and how can anyone say that skepticism is superior to other kinds of philosophy? And, most importantly, why should we call it philosophy at all?

Two ways to approach this:

1. We can look at what the Pyrrhonists actually say, the ideas they propose, namely, that: first we suspend judgment about everything; then we stop holding beliefs; just live according to appearances; achieve peace of mind. However, this doesn't sound like serious philosophy.
2. Instead of looking for a “system” of skeptical ideas, we can pick out pieces of their reasoning and ahistorically appropriate them for our own philosophical purposes (e.g., arguments for suspension, the views on the nature of suspension, peer disagreement, metaethics, religion, etc.). Pyrrhonian skepticism seems alive in philosophy today. However, it is still unclear why this is philosophy at all.

The tension in skepticism

To be a philosopher, one must

- a. be an inquirer (*skeptikos* means “inquirer”), and
- b. suspend judgment about the object of inquiry.

However, it seems that these two conditions cannot easily be satisfied at the same time.

“When people are investigating any subject, the likely result is either (1) a discovery, or (2) a denial of discovery and a confession of inapprehensibility, or (3) else a continuation of the investigation. This, no doubt, is why in the case of philosophical investigations, too, (1) some have said that they have discovered the truth, (2) some have asserted that it cannot be apprehended, and (3) others are still investigating. Those who are called (1) dogmatists in the proper sense of the word think that they have discovered the truth—for example, the schools of Aristotle and Epicurus and the Stoics, and some others. (2) The schools of Clitomachus and Carneades, and other Academics, have asserted that things cannot be apprehended. And (3) the sceptics are still investigating.” (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.1–3)

Problems with this division:

- a. From what Sextus says, it follows that before they claimed to have found the truth, the Epicureans, for example, were also skeptics, since they were engaged in inquiry. Actually, it follows that all philosophers are skeptics before they claim to have found the truth. This is true, insofar as philosophy is inquiry; but this is not what Sextus wants to argue here.
- b. It follows that the skeptics only become skeptics after the dogmatists have claimed to find the truth. So skepticism seems to be defined relative to dogmatists: you are a skeptic if you keep

investigating after someone else has stopped. However, being a skeptic should be an intrinsic property of a philosopher, not relative to other philosophers.

c. It is naive to assume that the Epicureans discovered that the world consists of atoms and void and then stopped investigating.

d. Perhaps Sextus wants to suggest that, unlike the dogmatists, the skeptics are always open to further inquiry: you're skeptic if you always want to inquire further. But it is unclear why dogmatists cannot be open to further inquiry.

e. Perhaps the Pyrrhonists are inquirers because they are constantly engaged in showing how to suspend judgment. In other words, since the dogmatists insist to have found the truth, the skeptics apply their arguments to refute the dogmatists and lead them to suspend judgment. Indeed, the skeptics sometimes present their skepticism as a kind of therapy. Sextus sometimes says that skeptics are altruists who aim to cure people of hasty acceptance of truths. Yet Sextus himself implies that Pyrrhonism is more than just therapy. Skeptics are not engaged only in second-order inquiry—refuting others—but also in first-order inquiry into things themselves.

f. Perhaps the idea is quite general:

(A) For any p that has been the object of philosophical inquiry, and about which the dogmatists have asserted that they have discovered whether it is true or false, the skeptics are still investigating whether it is true or false.

However, the skeptics are also suspenders of judgment. This means that they also hold that

(B) For any p that has been the object of philosophical inquiry, and about which the dogmatists have asserted that they have discovered whether it is true or false, the skeptics are suspending judgment whether it is true or false.

Sextus wants skeptics to be both; he wants that both (A) and (B) apply to them:

“The sceptical way, then, is also called (1) Investigative, from its activity in investigating and inquiring; (2) Suspensive, from the affection that comes about in the inquirer after the investigation. (3) Aporetic, either (as some say) (a) from the fact that it puzzles over and investigates everything, or else (b) from its being at a loss whether to assent or deny; and (4) Pyrrhonian, from the fact that Pyrrho appears to us to have attached himself to scepticism more systematically and conspicuously than anyone before him.” (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.7)

(Note: suspension comes after inquiry.)

How can the skeptics be both inquirers and suspenders? If they are suspenders, their inquiry has come to an end; and if they are inquirers, they are not yet in the state of suspension, since suspension comes after inquiry.

If the skeptics insist on being inquirers, it becomes unclear how they differ from other philosophers. But if they are suspenders, it is unclear what the skeptics actually do, and why they should be considered philosophers at all. Philosophy is a kind of activity, whereas suspension is not an activity. (Jonathan Barnes: “[S]ince an emeritus professor is no longer a professor, surely a sceptical philosopher is no longer a philosopher. Sextan scepticism is not a philosophy: it is a retirement from philosophy.”)

What is suspension?

Three groups of questions regarding suspension in general:

1. Is suspension something that is rationally required when one is faced with a problem one is unable to resolve, so that it is a matter of voluntary choice, or is it something to which we are psychologically compelled?
2. Is suspension metacognitive, that is, does it involve the belief that one neither believes nor disbelieves that p (or that one believes neither p nor not- p), or is it simply a first-order absence of belief that p or not- p ?
3. Is suspension sufficiently characterized by the mere absence of belief and disbelief, or does it involve some further attitude?

Skeptical suspension:

1. The skeptic suspends judgment when faced with reasons supporting p and reasons supporting not- p , and when both sets of reasons appear equally persuasive. In such a situation, the skeptic is compelled to suspend judgment; it is not a matter of choice.

“Suspension of judgement is mental conflict on account of which we neither reject nor posit anything.” (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 1.10)

“Suspension of judgement is so-called from the fact that the intellect is suspended so as neither to posit nor to reject anything because of the equipollence of the items under investigation.” (1.196)

“The phrase ‘I suspend judgment’ is used for ‘I am unable to say which of the things proposed I should find credible and which I should not find credible.’” (1.196)

2. Skeptical suspension does not involve any further belief (suspension is described as “affection” or “feeling,” *pathos*).

(However, meta-suspension is also possible. Suppose that the skeptic is faced with persuasive arguments in favor of p , persuasive arguments in favor of not- p , and persuasive arguments in favor of suspending judgment about whether p or not- p . If all these arguments appear equally persuasive to her, the skeptic will be compelled to suspend judgment about whether to suspend judgment or to form a belief that p or that not- p .)

3. Mere absence of belief or disbelief is not sufficient for suspension. For if it were, it would mean that you suspend judgment about something you are simply ignorant of.

The Pyrrhonian skeptic suspends judgment about whether p if:

after having considered the arguments in favor of p and the arguments against p , she, as a matter of psychological compulsion, neither believes nor disbelieves p .

Why skeptics are both suspenders and inquirers

We should take into account who is suspending judgment, or in which intellectual disposition a person is in when she suspends judgment.

Three situations:

- (1) You believe that p or that not- p , but then, having considered arguments in favour of both sides, withdraw your assent and suspend judgement.**

This is the situation the skeptics hope to produce in dogmatist philosophers and ordinary people.

By suspending judgment about p , one becomes a skeptic about p . But one does not thereby become a skeptic properly speaking, since one likely still holds beliefs about other

propositions, q , r , and so on. And the skeptic proper is someone who suspends judgment about everything.

(2) You have no belief as to which of p and not- p is true, and then suspend judgment.

This is the situation in which, according to Sextus, the skeptics found themselves before they became skeptics proper.

Suppose that you have no belief as to which of p or not- p is true, and that you engage in inquiry. Two outcomes are possible:

- o You may come to believe that p is true or that not- p is true. Then you are a dogmatist about p . If a skeptic applies her arguments to you, you may suspend judgment. We are thus back in situation **(1)**.
- o The inquiry may fail. You may find that the arguments for p and for not- p are equally persuasive. In that case, you will suspend judgment about p and become a skeptic about p , without previously having belief about p .

Suppose you repeat the same process with further propositions, q , r , and so on, about which you likewise had no prior belief—and that each time you reach the same result: suspension.

By suspending judgment about p , q , r , etc., you are now suspending judgment on two levels.

- a. You experience first-order suspension: you suspend judgment about whether p , q , r , etc., are true or false.
- b. You may experience second-order suspension: you suspend judgment about whether, for any pair of propositions that can be the object of inquiry, one member of the pair must be true.

In other words, you may have undergone a kind of cognitive transformation (assuming, of course, that you have repeated this process across many propositions). You may have abandoned the belief that inquiry must have truth as its result.

(3) You suspend judgment about everything.

If you are in this state, then you are a proper Pyrrhonian skeptic.

You have reached this state on the basis of second-order suspension from the previous stage **(2b)**.

So, to suspend judgment about everything means (a) that you suspend judgment about every problem you have considered so far and (b) that you suspend judgment that the result of your future inquiry must be truth.

Being in this state is a precondition for genuine skeptical inquiry.

Suppose you are a Pyrrhonian skeptic and that you suspend judgment about everything in the sense described. And suppose that you want to inquire into p .

1. If you encounter equally persuasive arguments for p and for not- p , between which no judgment can be made, you will suspend judgment.
2. But you may have to admit that the arguments for p are more persuasive.
3. In that case, you can investigate whether this means that p is true, or whether “is true” is even applicable to p .

4. But you can also investigate what other attitude to adopt toward p : should you accept p as true, as plausible, as more credible than not- p , or as something that merely appears as p or as true?

Thus, the skeptics are both suspenders of judgment and inquirers:

They are suspenders because they suspend judgment about every proposition they have so far examined. But more importantly, they are suspenders with respect to the outcome of future inquiry: the outcome need not be truth—but it need not be the recognition that truth cannot be found, either.

They are, at the same time, inquirers: their inquiry, which proceeds from (second-order) suspension, differs from dogmatist inquiry, which always presupposes that the outcome must be either the discovery of truth or the admission that truth cannot be discovered.

Skepticism, truth, and appearances

Two objections:

1. The outcome of the skeptics' inquiry is already known. For:

a. So far, they have suspended judgment about every object of their inquiry, and it is reasonable to suppose that they will continue to do so.

b. We can reasonably expect that they will suspend judgment about truth as well. (For, if they assume that " p is true" means the same as p , then by suspending judgment about p they also suspend judgment about truth. And if they assume that " p is true" does not mean the same as p , then "is true" is itself a separate object of investigation. Yet the skeptics suspend judgment about that object as well. For they maintain that there is an unresolved disagreement concerning truth—about what the truthmakers are, what the truth-bearers are, and even about the meaning of the predicate "is true." It follows that we can expect that they will suspend judgment about truth.)

Thus, if we assume that the skeptics investigate both individual propositions and the question whether such investigation must result in the discovery of truth (or in the acknowledgment that truth cannot be discovered), then we already know the outcome: they suspend judgment about both. Hence:

2. Is there any other possible outcome of skeptical investigation besides suspension?

"As we said before, we do not overturn anything which leads us, without our willing it, to assent in accordance with a passive appearance—and these things are precisely what is apparent. When we investigate whether existing things are such as they appear, we grant that they appear, and what we investigate is not what is apparent but what is said about what is apparent—and this is different from investigating what is apparent itself. For example, it appears to us that honey sweetens (we concede this inasmuch as we are sweetened in a perceptual way); but whether (as far as the argument goes) it is actually sweet is something we investigate—and this is not what is apparent but something said about what is apparent." (1.19–20)

"Hence no-one, presumably, will raise a controversy over whether an existing thing appears this way or that; rather, they investigate whether it is such as it appears." (1.22)

– Suppose that you investigate whether honey is sweet.

– As a skeptic, you will eventually be forced to admit that you must suspend judgment about whether honey is sweet.

– But what exactly is the object of your suspension?

- You suspend judgment about everything that has been the object of your inquiry: whether it is true that honey is sweet, whether honey is actually sweet, whether it is sweet by nature, and so on.
- But it appears sweet to you, and that is not something you can inquire into.

Hence, apart from suspension, the only remaining possible outcome of skeptical investigation is the acknowledgment that things appear to us in certain ways.

Conclusion

To summarize: The problem was how, in any meaningful sense, skepticism can count as a kind of philosophy. Insofar as it recommends a life of simply following appearances, it does not look like philosophy at all, since such a life contains no specifically philosophical activity. On the other hand, skepticism offers a number of more or less powerful arguments and strategies (such as the Ten Modes of Aenesidemus or the Five Modes of Agrippa) but it is not obvious why Pyrrhonian skepticism as such should count as a philosophical position.

My answer is this: the skeptics are philosophers insofar as they engage in the same kind of activity as other philosophers: they investigate philosophical questions. They do so, however, while in a state of suspension concerning whether such inquiry ought to culminate in truth. In other words, suspension is not only something that follows unsuccessful inquiry into which of the opposing propositions one should assent to, but also something that precedes such inquiry, since the skeptics have no prior belief that the outcome of that inquiry must be the truth. The aim of their inquiry is to arrive at what cannot be further investigated and about which suspension is no longer possible. And it turns out that these are the ways things appear to us. So, in a sense, they already know where their inquiry will lead.

- What should we make of this?
- Socratic advice: we must follow the argument wherever it leads (Plato, *Euthyphro*, *Republic*).
- The ancient skeptics took this advice perhaps a bit too literally.
- They didn't just follow the argument, whether strong or weak, wherever it led them—they end up following appearances.
- Pyrrhonian skepticism: a way of thinking in which the philosopher simply cannot stop where she perhaps should.