

# Outlines of Pyrrhonism

(Πυρρῶνειοὶ ὑποτυπώσεις)

Sextus Empiricus, ~200 CE

Translated and commented by  
Benson Mates:  
*The Sceptic Way*  
OUP, 1996

An Aapo Tea Talk  
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# Background: Pyrrho and Skepticism

- Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360-c. 270 BCE) founded Skeptic school of Greek philosophy
  - Travelled to India with Alexander the Great
- Later school divided into Academic and Pyrrhonian branches
- Sextus Empiricus wrote most famous review of (Pyrrhonian) Scepticism, ~200 CE
- Typically of Hellenistic philosophy, goal is happiness / peace of mind
  - Similar to Stoics, Epicureans, neo-Platonists
- Originally in Greek: Skepsis = examination, observation
- Skepticism in modern language is something rather different, “doubt”

# Skepticism: kind of a definition

- When people start searching for something, three things can happen
  - They find it
  - They do not find it and conclude it cannot be found
  - They continue to search
- This is the case with truth in philosophy
- [Pyrrhonian] “Skeptics continue to search [for the truth]”
- Sextus does not describe a philosophy but simply describes how a Skeptic would usually think and behave
  - ... as it appears to be to Sextus,
  - but he admits he can be mistaken

# The goal of Skepticism

- Goal is peace of mind
- ...which follows suspension of judgement
- ...which is obtained by opposing phenomena to each other and seeing that they have equal strength
  
- Method:  
*For any claim or valuation, oppose another phenomenon*
- The person who takes no position as to what is by nature good or bad neither avoids nor pursues intensely, and reaches peace of mind

# Skeptic practice I: Ten Modes

- “When we press the eye from the side, the forms and shapes and sizes of the objects we see appear elongated and narrow.”
- “Whom we should assent to? The Platonist will say, 'To Plato', the Epicurean, 'To Epicurus', and the others analogously, and so by their undecidable dissensions they will bring us round again to suspension of judgement.”
- “Some of the Ethiopians tattoo their babies, while we do not. The Persians consider it becoming to wear brightly-coloured full-length garments, while we consider it unbecoming. Indians have sex with women in public, while most other people think this shameful.”
- (...)
- So, since so much anomaly has been shown in objects, we shall not be able to say what each existing object is like in its nature, but only how it appears relative to a given human being, philosophy, lifestyle, custom, and so on. Therefore, it is necessary for us to *suspend judgement* on the nature of external existing objects.

# Skeptic practice II: Slogans

- “Not more” (this than that)
- “To every argument an equal argument is opposed”
- Sextus point out:  
“We absolutely do not firmly maintain anything about these slogans being true, as they are included among the cases to which they apply”  
(Pyrrhonian speciality)

# This appears to be the last slide

- Popular Latin translation appeared 1500's
  - Strongly influenced Montaigne, Descartes, Hume
- According to Benson Mates, translation of central attitude as “dubito” or doubt contributed to major misunderstanding
- *Take home:*  
*Pyrrhonian Skeptics suspend judgement about everything – including Pyrrhonism itself*