

The Problems of Scepticism

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***Logical Analysis and History of Philosophy* vol. 10 (2007): pp. 36-52**

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Abstract

*This article is focused on answering the question to what extent one is able to be a sceptic. Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Scepticism* serves as a guide. In section 1, it is investigated whether three logical laws have a certain foundation or are subject to doubt. In section 2, Sextus's way to deal with these laws is examined; the question arises how dogmatic his approach is. After that, a possible 'reply' by Sextus to the criticism receives attention. Section 3 is concentrated on a possible alternative to Sextus's approach. Besides logical laws, some important methods are concerned.*

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel konzentriert sich darauf, die Frage zu beantworten, inwieweit man ein Skeptiker sein kann. Sextus Empiricus' Grundzüge des Skeptizismus dienen als Anleitung. In Abschnitt 1 wird untersucht, ob drei logische Gesetze eine sichere Fundierung aufweisen oder Zweifeln unterliegen. In Abschnitt 2 wird Sextus' Art, mit diesen Gesetzen umzugehen, betrachtet. Die Frage erhebt sich, wie dogmatisch sein Ansatz ist. Danach wird eine mögliche Antwort von Sextus auf diese Kritik betrachtet. Im Mittelpunkt von Abschnitt 3 steht eine mögliche Alternative zu Sextus' Ansatz. Neben logischen Gesetzen werden einige wichtige Methoden behandelt.

Introduction

The influence of scepticism on modern thinking is great. A new theory on any subject is thoroughly investigated before it is accepted (or not). The method of scepticism may be valuable in preventing an uncritical approach. This doesn't mean, of course, that this method itself can't be examined critically. In this article, I will inquire the consistency of the ideas of an important classical sceptic, Sextus Empiricus. He presents a great number of arguments why one should embrace the sceptical method, but it seems he uses a number of standards he doesn't allow others to accept. This applies in particular to three basic laws of logic.

In order to make it clear what relevance these have to the discussion, they will be dealt with in section 1, by showing what their status is in a present perspective. After all, if they were to be acknowledged beyond any doubt to be useful means, the issue that Sextus uses them would be non-existent. This is, however, not the case, as will be shown. In section 2, it will be enquired what Sextus's attitude towards the said laws of logic is. His perspective on logic is most clearly presented in his *Outlines of Scepticism*,¹ which is the main reason I have concentrated on his presentation in that work. It is of importance to ascertain to what extent Sextus relies on the laws of logic in order to be able to find out whether he may really be qualified as a consistent sceptic.

In section 3, the relevance of two other reasonable criteria is explored; does Sextus maintain that an infinite regression and a logical circle are problematic, and, if so, does this further endanger Sextus's position as a sceptic? An alternative to scepticism is presented in this section as well.

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1. Logic and reason

¹ Long, A.A., "Sextus Empiricus on the criterion of truth", p. 32.

In this section, I will expound some basic ideas of a few important logicians and indicate the differences between their points of view. The relevance for scepticism will primarily become clear in section 2, but in the treatment of the logical laws some attention will already be devoted to them.

1.1

An important thought for Frege (1848-1925) was the objectivity of logic. Frege wanted to point out logic's correct place and prevent a mixture with the inner world: "In order to exclude any misunderstanding and not to let the boundary between psychology and logic fade, I give logic the task to find the laws of truth, not those of appearance or thinking. In the laws of truth, the meaning of the word "true" is developed."²

With this, the thought is connected that the True and the False are independently of (human) thinking existing truth-values: "The Thoughts are neither things of the outside world, nor representations. A third realm must be acknowledged."³ This 'third realm' must be understood as independent of both the human mind and the outside world. There is a parallel with Plato's world of Ideas. Frege, accordingly, is a logical realist. A consequence of his system of thought is that there is only room for true and false truth-values: "Under a truth-value of a statement I understand the circumstance under which it is true or false. Other truth-values don't exist."⁴

In order to illustrate how this works, an example of Bolzano (1781-1848), another logical realist, is enlightening. He doesn't speak of Thoughts, but of 'Truths as such' ('Wahrheiten an sich'): "I understand by a Truth as such any arbitrary statement which states something as it is, whereby I leave undetermined whether this sentence is thought and expressed by someone or not."⁵

As an example of this, he mentions a tree with a fixed number of leaves, of which this number is determined, whether one knows this or not: "The number of blossoms which a certain tree which stands in a given place carried last spring, for instance, is a supposed number, even if no-one knows it, etc."⁶ On the basis of this case, one can state: "The tree had 1000 leaves or it didn't." One of these situations was the case. Frege maintains, as does Bolzano, the idea that the True and the False are values that exist independent of human thoughts. The principle of excluded middle⁷ is fundamental to him: statements are either true or false, even if no one utters them or thinks about them.

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1.2

The analysis given by Brouwer (1881-1966) is completely different. Given that one may not accept starting-points without a well-founded reason for doing so, he only accepts theses that have been proved. Logic and mathematics are sciences which are not reliable as such: "Just as everything without religion, science has neither religious reliability nor reliability as such."⁸

Brouwer examines the syllogism, the principle of contradiction⁹ and the principle of excluded middle. The syllogism and the principle of contradiction are accepted by him; the question whether the principle of excluded middle holds, however, can't be answered without induction:

“(...) The whole of systems to be developed from the question [namely “the question of the validity of the principle of excluded middle”, p. 156, J.D.] is *countably unfinished*, so not a priori methodically examinable with respect to the presence or absence of a system

² Frege, G., "Der Gedanke", p. 343.

³ Frege, G., "Der Gedanke", p. 353.

⁴ Frege, G., "Über Sinn und Bedeutung", p. 149.

⁵ Bolzano, B., *Wissenschaftslehre*, § 25 (p. 137).

⁶ Bolzano, B., *ibid.*

⁷ Expressed in logic as ' $p \vee \neg p$ '.

⁸ Brouwer, L., "De onbetrouwbaarheid der logische principes", p. 152.

⁹ Expressed in logic as ' $\neg(p \wedge \neg p)$ '.

which decides on the question. So that the principium tertii exclusi is in infinite systems as yet not reliable.”¹⁰

Brouwer indicates, in other words, that the matter whether this law holds can't be solved purely reasonably, but only with the aid of experience. He doesn't state that it doesn't hold per se, but leaves room for doubt: “It is still uncertain whether the mathematical question: “*Is the principium tertii exclusi indefinitely valid in mathematics?*” has a solution.”¹¹

With the aid of logic one may show that there is a problem of foundation here. In order to indicate that there are only two values, true and false, the following proof may be given:

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|-------------------------------|---|
| 1. $\neg (p \vee \neg p)$ | Assumption (the opposite of that which is to be proved is assumed in order to infer it from this) |
| 2. p | Assumption (starting-point) |
| 3. $p \vee \neg p$ | This may be introduced on the basis of 2 |
| 4. * | Absurdity: one obtains both ' $\neg (p \vee \neg p)$ ' and its opposite, i.e. ' $p \vee \neg p$ ' ¹² |
| 5. $\neg p$ | From absurdity, ' \neg ' may be introduced |
| 6. $p \vee \neg p$ | From 5, ' p ' may be introduced |
| 7. * | Absurdity: one obtains both ' $\neg (p \vee \neg p)$ ' and its opposite, i.e. ' $p \vee \neg p$ ' |
| 8. $\neg\neg (p \vee \neg p)$ | From absurdity, ' \neg ' may be introduced |
| 9. $p \vee \neg p$ | From 8, it is stated: ' $(\neg\neg (p \vee \neg p)) \rightarrow (p \vee \neg p)$ ' |

According to Brouwer's analysis, the first eight steps are justified, but the ninth isn't. This step is based on the thought that there are only two truth-values. There is, in other words, a circle in logic here: in order to prove that there are only two values, one has to resort to the proof given above, in which the principle is implicitly present. Within the boundaries of logic it can't be proved that there are only two values. This does not, in my opinion, mean that one *has* to assume that [Page 39] there are more than two values, but at any rate this train of thought indicates that doubt with regard to the principle of excluded middle is justified.

1.3

A more fundamental law than the principle of excluded middle is that of contradiction. As was shown in section 1.2, Brouwer too clung to this. It is an intuitively insightful notion; one can't, for example, I suppose, imagine a situation in which it rains and doesn't rain in the same place at the same time. Yet the value of this law too can be doubted. In paraconsistent logic, in which paradoxes are not rejected but accepted, it is not maintained: “The basic idea of paraconsistency is as simple as it is radical. The fundamental classical postulate that truth and falsehood are mutually exclusive is rejected and replaced by the idea there may be sentences of a language such that both they and their negations are true.”¹³

In this approach, when the limit of thought is set with a contradiction, in the sense that when one is confronted with a contradiction, one has to acknowledge that one can't continue thinking, one must in fact already have passed this limit. There is, in this way of thinking, no guarantee that only one of two opposite values in a statement can be true: “(...) Orthodox logic assures us that for every statement, α , only *one* of α and $\neg\alpha$ is true. (...) Orthodox logic, however well entrenched, is just a theory of how logical particles, like negation, work; and there is no a priori guarantee that it is correct.”¹⁴

It is not my intention to offer this analysis or the one outlined in section 1.2, by Brouwer, as a correct alternative for the one presented in section 1.1; for the purpose of this article, in which not the foundations of logic are investigated but the tenability of scepticism, it is sufficient to make clear that

¹⁰ Brouwer, L., “De onbetrouwbaarheid der logische principes”, p. 157.

¹¹ Brouwer, L., “De onbetrouwbaarheid der logische principes”, p. 158.

¹² In classical and intuitionistic logic, the principle of contradiction is accepted. This will receive attention in section 1.3.

¹³ Priest, G., “Classical Logic *aufgehoben*”, p. 141.

¹⁴ Priest, G., *Beyond the limits of thought*, p. 4.

the logical laws can be doubted and are no certain starting-points. The principle of identity¹⁵ is a more fundamental principle than the two laws mentioned above. If one doubts this, an obstruction for thinking is created. Since this is particularly relevant for scepticism, I will devote attention to it in section 2.

2. Sextus's reasonable criteria

In the preceding, it has been indicated that the laws of logic, although they can be doubted from certain angles, play an important role in the usual way of reasoning and doubting them is not something which happens naturally. In this section, I intend to point out that Sextus Empiricus utilises the logical laws as criteria in his inquiry, although he himself claims not to utilise any criteria, except that which appears, the phenomenon (*to phainomenon*),¹⁶ with which one remains on the level of appearance and doesn't agree with anything. In section 2.1, some relevant passages are commented on, after which [Page 40] it is examined in section 2.2 whether Sextus anticipates the criticism which can be given of his method and what his response might be.

2.1

There are three ways in which Sextus deals with the logical laws. In some passages he sums up an argumentation, the findings of which he disagrees with; he does, however, agree, or not necessarily disagree, with the method used to produce these findings, a method in which the logical laws have been utilised. There are also instances in which he offers an argumentation himself which leans on the laws of logic, in which case he has a criterion himself. Finally, there are passages in which Sextus speaks explicitly about 'true' and 'false'. In order to represent the distinction between the different sorts of passages, I will deal with them in three subsections.

2.1.1

In book 3, Sextus indicates why movement is impossible:

"If something is moved, then it is moved either in a place in which it is or in a place in which it is not. But neither in a place in which it is (it is at rest in it, since it is in it), nor a place in which it is not (a thing can neither act nor be acted upon where it is not). Therefore nothing moves."¹⁷

As he points out himself, this argument comes from Diodorus Cronus. Sextus doesn't agree with this thought – as a sceptic, he suspends judgement ("(...) We suspend judgement as to whether there is or is not such a thing as motion."¹⁸).

It is, however, important that he does not criticise the line of thought which is represented in the argument. As such it can be used, that is to say: the structure of the argument is not problematic, only the fact that another argument can be opposed to it. The thought that something can only be moved in a place where it is or isn't ($p \vee \neg p$) is not criticised.

In order to answer the question whether something is generated, Sextus reproduces the argument that it can't be:

"If anything is generated, either what exists is generated or what does not exist is generated. But what does not exist is not generated; for nothing holds of what does not exist, and so being generated does not hold of it. Nor what exists. If what exists is generated, it is generated either insofar as it is existent or insofar as it is not existent. Now

¹⁵ Expressed in logic as $p \leftrightarrow p$.

¹⁶ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 22 (p. 9).

¹⁷ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 71 (p. 163).

¹⁸ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 81 (p. 166).

it is not generated insofar as it is not existent; but if it is generated insofar as it is existent, then since they say that what is generated comes to be different from what it was, what is generated will be different from what exists, i.e. it will be non-existent. Therefore what is generated will be non-existent – and that is incongruous. Thus, if neither what is existent nor what is non-existent is generated, nothing is generated.”¹⁹

Here, too, the argument is not Sextus’s; he merely points out how some think about the matter;²⁰ he himself concludes that “(...) The natural science of the Dogmatists is unreal and inconceivable.”²¹ [Page 41] However, the argument is left unimpaired here as well; the thought conveyed is not criticised but merely opposed to another one to make clear that one ought to suspend judgement. In it, the principle of excluded middle is expressed: the examination only concerns that which exists and that which doesn’t.

The only thing Sextus does in these passages is represent the thoughts of others about a certain matter; the fact that he doesn’t reject their way of thinking doesn’t mean that he agrees with them. There are, however, passages in which Sextus presents his own thoughts regarding the logical structure. These are, in order to demonstrate that he utilises reasonable criteria, more convincing than the two mentioned above.

2.1.2

Sextus states that there is no proof (*apodeixis*).²² He nonetheless examines what might be a possible proof: “(...) The so-called proof will itself be either apparent to us or not apparent. If it is not apparent, then we shall not bring it forward with confidence. But if it is apparent to us, then since what is being investigated is what is apparent to animals, and the proof is apparent to us, and we are animals, then the proof itself will be under investigation to see whether it is true as well as apparent.”²³ If a proof could be given, it would either have to be apparent to mankind or not, so the criterion for this proof is the principle of excluded middle.

In dealing with proofs of the existence of God, Sextus states that such a proof is either clear or not: “(...) Anyone who tries to prove that there are gods, does so either by way of something clear or else by way of something unclear. Certainly not by way of something clear (...). Nor yet by way of something unclear.”²⁴ For Sextus, to make clear that the fact that both a certain proof, which is clear, and the opposite, a proof which is unclear, don’t suffice, is apparently enough to conclude that a proof of God is insufficient. This conclusion is absolutely justified, but only as long as one assumes that the principle of excluded middle is valid, which Sextus does.

In dealing with ‘place’ (*topos*), only two possibilities emerge: “(...) If there are such things as places, they are either generated or ungenerated.”²⁵ There is again a logical (reasonable) criterion present. The same applies to the treatment of time (*chronos*); with regard to this, there are no more than two options, namely that it is finite and that it is infinite; further, that it is divisible and indivisible: “(...) If it is neither infinite nor finite, time does not exist at all.”²⁶; “(...) If it is neither indivisible nor divisible, it does not exist.”²⁷ Regarding the question whether something is taught, Sextus states that it (if any) is either corporeal or not: “(...) What is taught is either a body or incorporeal.”²⁸

The advantage of the strategy which consists in doubting both a certain matter and its opposite is obvious: in this way, one may consistently deprive both possibilities to defend something of their

¹⁹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 112, 113 (pp. 173, 174).

²⁰ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 112 (p. 173).

²¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 114 (p. 174).

²² Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 60 (p. 17).

²³ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 60 (pp. 17, 18).

²⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 7, 8 (pp. 144, 145).

²⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 132 (p. 179).

²⁶ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 142 (p. 181).

²⁷ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 143 (p. 181).

²⁸ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 255 (p. 210).

persuasiveness and therefore (as these [Page 42] are the only possibilities available) conclude that one should suspend judgement. The question remains if this strategy is justified. If Sextus had not regarded himself a sceptic, there would be no problem. Since he did, however, a treatment in which criteria to reach conclusions are utilised is problematic for him.

This applies to the principle of contradiction as well. This, too, is used by Sextus in many instances. When dealing with the possible proof, he points out that, since something can't be simultaneously convincing and unconvincing, which applies to a possible proof, one has no proofs: "(...) It is absurd to try to establish the matter under investigation through the matter under investigation, since the same thing will then be both convincing and unconvincing (...), which is impossible."²⁹ (The argumentation is a continuation of passage I, 60 quoted above.)

In book 3, in which a great number of issues are treated, a large area of application is at Sextus's disposal. Concerning the material principles which underlie everything else, many different opinions have been expressed. Sextus's goal, from his sceptical angle, is to point out that concerning this one should not defend a – dogmatic – position, but suspend judgement. He does this by opposing these positions to each other, in which he utilises the principle of contradiction:

"(...) We shall assent either to all the positions I have described (and to the others too) or to some of them. It is not possible to assent to all: we shall surely not be able to assent both to Asclepiades, who says that the elements are frangible and possess qualities, and to Democritus, who asserts that they are atomic and qualityless, and to Anaxagoras, who allows his uniform stuffs every perceptible quality."³⁰

Sextus uses the same strategy when he investigates what should be understood by 'the good' (*to agathon*): "When [the Dogmatists] are asked what it is which has these attributes [namely, that it benefits, that it is chosen and that it produces happiness, J.D.] they fall into a war without truce, some saying that it is virtue, others pleasure, others absence of pain, others something else."³¹ On the basis of this, he concludes: "It is impossible to be convinced either by all the positions set out above (because of the conflict) or by any one of them."³² The conflict (*hè machè*) is a problem for Sextus; he doesn't indicate why and it is apparently a fundamental thought (and criterion) for him that a position and its opposite can't be true at the same time. (One can maintain the other issue in the train of thought in III, 182, that one can't prefer one of the positions to the other, without having to resort to the principle of contradiction.)

When dealing with movement, Sextus uses, as has been pointed out in section 2.1.1, the principle of excluded middle. In the same context, the principle of contradiction receives attention; this time not from someone else's perspective, like Diodorus Cronus's, but from that of Sextus himself. He ingeniously shows that self-movement is impossible (only within a context, of course, since it can't in the end be decided if there is movement or not): "If [whatever moves itself] moves itself by pushing, it will be behind itself; if by pulling, in front of itself; if by lifting, below; if by depressing, above. But it is impossible for anything to be above or [Page 43] in front of or below or behind itself. It is therefore impossible for anything to be moved by itself."³³

Sextus has more to say about the problems which accompany the question concerning the generation and destruction of things than he does in passage III, 112 when he implicitly agrees with the principle of excluded middle (cf. section 2.1.1) as well. One may say that nothing is destroyed; here, first of all the principle of excluded middle applies: "If anything is destroyed, either what is existent or what is non-existent is destroyed."³⁴ Further, with regard to the existent, the following applies: "(...) It is destroyed either while remaining in the state of being existent or while not so remaining. If while remaining in the state of being existent, the same thing will at the same time be

²⁹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 61 (p. 18).

³⁰ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 33 (p. 151).

³¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 175 (p. 190).

³² Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 182 (p. 192).

³³ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 69 (p. 163).

³⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 113 (p. 174).

both existent and non-existent (...).”³⁵ This is impossible, however, for: “(...) It is absurd to say that the same thing is both existent and non-existent.”³⁶

About place, too, more can be said than merely with the aid of the principle of excluded middle. If one examines how a place could originate, a contradiction is found:

“(...) It is argued that when a body enters a void and a place comes into being, the void either remains or withdraws or is destroyed. But if it remains, the same thing will be both full and void. If it withdraws by way of local motion or is destroyed by changing, then the void will be a body (...). But it is absurd to say that the same thing is void and full, or that a void is a body. Therefore it is absurd to say that a void can be occupied by a body and become a place.”³⁷

Sextus again uses the word ‘absurd’ (*atopos*) and again there is a reasonable criterion involved which serves him in his inquiry.

2.1.3

The fact that reasonable criteria are utilised in Sextus’s examination, in which logic implicitly serves as a means, is, in my opinion, sufficient to conclude that he can’t be characterised as a radical sceptic, because he, by holding on to these, does not suspend judgement in each case. The places where this can be shown most convincingly are, however, those where Sextus explicitly speaks of ‘truth’. There are three passages in the *Outlines* where this happens.

In the context of the fourth of the modes (*tropoi*), the one which depends on circumstances, Sextus points out why one can’t decide on anomalies about the appearances:

“Anyone who prefers one appearance to another and one circumstance to another does so either without making a judgement and without proof or making a judgement and offering a proof. But he can do so neither without these (for he will be unconvincing) nor yet with them. For if he judges the appearances he will certainly judge them by means of a standard.”³⁸

It is of importance what Sextus says about this standard: “(...) He will say of this standard either that it is true or that it is false. If false, he will be unconvincing. But if he says that it is true, then he will say that the standard is true either without proof [Page 44] or with proof.”³⁹ Apparently, the only possibilities which exist are true and false; a middle course, in which something is neither, is absent and Sextus is content when he has examined and refuted both possibilities.

Meanwhile, the status of this passage is dubious in the sense that it is possible that Sextus merely represents the way of thinking of an opponent; after all, the position of ‘anyone who prefers one appearance to another’ is described. For this reason, this fragment could have been treated in section 2.1.1 as well. Still, there are fragments in which Sextus describes his own position.

In answering the question whether something is true by nature, Sextus discusses four possibilities. Things are true, false, false nor true or both true and false. He gives some persuasive arguments to demonstrate the impossibility of the first three situations. In order to do this for the first two of these, he does require the principle of contradiction. There would only be an implicit logical structure, as is the case for the passages quoted in section 2.1.2, were it not that another analysis than this is given for the fourth situation. Here, Sextus explicitly agrees with the idea that something cannot be true and false at the same time: “(...) That which has a nature such as to be true will certainly not be false.”⁴⁰

³⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, *ibid.*

³⁶ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 114 (p. 174).

³⁷ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 129 (p. 178).

³⁸ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 114 (p. 30).

³⁹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 115 (p. 30).

⁴⁰ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, II, 87 (p. 89).

With regard to the question whether something can be taught, finally, Sextus says that something which is taught is either true or false,⁴¹ which is, I think, again a confirmation that Sextus maintains logical (reasonable) criteria, in this case the principle of excluded middle.

Of the three logical laws, Sextus maintains two, namely the principle of contradiction and that of excluded middle, explicitly. The third, that of identity, is not explicitly affirmed by him. However, there is no escaping implicitly agreeing with it. After all, once he, after having mentioned a certain thesis, quotes this same thesis, he presupposes a continuity: the thesis has the same meaning at the first occurrence as it does at the second.⁴²

This is, of course, no point of criticism in the sense that this principle should not play a role in Sextus's argumentation, since it is inevitable if a number of thoughts are expounded, but it is in the sense that Sextus, as a sceptic, can't, from this position, agree with any criterion and therefore with any principle (be it logical or not). The criticism directed at Sextus is not that he does not give a reasonable exposition, but that he does.

2.2

Section 2.1 was focused on a demonstration of Sextus's use of some reasonable criteria. Yet some room is needed for nuance. Sextus arms himself against a criticism of this sort by careful formulations and various ways to avoid direct attacks. It is, however, to be decided whether this defence suffices. This will be examined in the rest of this section. **[Page 45]**

As has yet been remarked, there is one criterion with which the sceptic agrees, namely that which appears. In practice one has to act in some way or other. One can't avoid living in accordance with everyday observations: "(...) For we are not able to be utterly inactive."⁴³ Indeed, one can't, as long as one lives, avoid living in a certain way. This does not mean, however, that one has to agree with reasonable criteria. When Sextus agrees with reasonable criteria, such as logical laws, however, he utilises such rules and doesn't adhere to the minimal demand to accept only that which appears. After all, these rules are themselves means which one uses to approach the appearance, as becomes clear when Sextus uses them to judge and appreciate the opinions with which he is confronted (that which appears). When he claims to suspend his judgement with regard to the question whether there is a standard or not⁴⁴ and says this on the basis of the fact that one may convey arguments both for and against this, he bases this on the thought that it can't be the case that both parties are right. In this case, the principle of contradiction precedes the suspension of judgement, which means that a criterion has been used.

When Sextus indicates that the standard by means of which something is to be decided is unreal (*anhuparktos*),⁴⁵ he fails to consider that he, in order to be able to claim this, must already have utilised a standard. This applies to the situation which is the result of suspending judgement, the equilibrium (*arrepisia*): "(...) Because of the equipollence of the opposed objects we end in equilibrium (By 'equipollence' we mean equality in what appears plausible to us; by 'opposed' we mean in general conflicting; and by 'equilibrium' we mean assent to neither side.)"⁴⁶ Here, after all, it is supposed that it is impossible for two opposites both to be the case, which is a reasonable criterion.

A statement which seems to guard Sextus from any possible criticism is made in the context of the eighth mode: "The eighth mode is the one deriving from relativity, by which we conclude that, since everything is relative, we shall suspend judgement as to what things are independently and in their nature. It should be recognised that here, as elsewhere, we use 'is' loosely, in the sense of 'appears', implicitly saying 'Everything appears relative'.⁴⁷ Sextus indicates not to want to claim anything concerning the being of things and only to want to describe the appearances. Meanwhile, the

⁴¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 253 (p. 209).

⁴² I can't agree with an approach that seeks a solution for this problem through the aid of another sort of logic (cf. in this respect, for example, Woleński, J. "Scepticism and Logic", pp. 191, 192).

⁴³ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 23 (p. 9).

⁴⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, II, 18 (p. 72).

⁴⁵ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, II, 69 (p. 84).

⁴⁶ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 190 (p. 47).

⁴⁷ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 135 (p. 35).

question arises whether this is in agreement with his approach. If everything has to be treated as merely appearing, this applies to the arguments Sextus uses to demonstrate the untenability of the statements of the dogmatists just as well. When he says, for instance: “(...) It is absurd to say that the same thing is both existent and non-existent.”⁴⁸ (cf. section 2.1.2), he merely means: ‘It *appears* absurd (...)’, but if this is the case, his statements have no persuasiveness and lack any value. If Sextus says his arguments must be maintained, he doesn’t qualify as a sceptic; if he, on the other hand, relativises them, they can merely serve as appearances and lack the force to be means for a serious criticism of the points of view of the dogmatists.

Sextus not only gives this general thesis, but also nuances specific statements. After having stated that places are either generated or not (cf. section 2.1.2), [Page 46] he remarks on the coming to be of places, questioning whether they contain a body or not. He reports these two possibilities, but also makes an additional statement: “(...) If places come into being neither when a body is in them nor when it is not, and if no option apart from these can be conceived of, then places are not generated (...).”⁴⁹ Elsewhere, too, Sextus comes up with this ‘escape route’; after having stated that that which is taught is either true or false,⁵⁰ a modification follows: “(...) If neither what is false nor what is true is taught, and if there is nothing teachable apart from them (...), then nothing is taught.”⁵¹

Perhaps Sextus means this in the other cases where he deals with the principle of excluded middle as well. If this is the case, however, the objection just made applies, namely that no real statement is made. Moreover, if this is Sextus’s position, he hasn’t indicated why the other possibility (or -ies) than true and false is (or are) acceptable; in each instance he has only said of a thesis and its opposite why they can’t be the case, without taking into consideration other options. The manner in which he describes his treatment of the principle of contradiction looks like the general thesis; Sextus doesn’t want, as the Heracliteans do, to state that opposites are the case; he merely wants to say that these appear to occur: “(...) While the Sceptics say that contraries appear to hold of the same thing, the Heracliteans go on from there to the idea that they actually do hold.”⁵²

If this is Sextus’s attitude, however, he seems to have reached his goal, tranquillity, sooner than he himself thought: tranquillity should follow from the fact that one doesn’t agree with any of both opposite positions and suspends judgement, but if one states that it merely appears that opposites are the case, one has already suspended judgement and there is no need to deal with the opposition.

Another problem is involved with the way in which Sextus denies to cling to the principle of identity. He describes two positions, the first coming down to agreeing with the principle and the second denying its value.⁵³ Sextus’s own position is that “(...) It will no doubt seem impossible for this dispute to be decided.”⁵⁴ From his statement that there are, except for the appearance, no criteria, this can be maintained, but it leads to a problem; it seems that one has to appeal to this principle, independent of the way one argues or thinks. The reason why this is the case has been indicated in section 2.1.3 and will be explained further in section 3, when an alternative for Sextus’s analysis will be given.

For now, it seems to be clear that Sextus, as long as he wants his arguments to have a meaning, can’t avoid agreeing with his own expositions of the logical principles. [Page 47]

3. Radical scepticism and the alternative

It has been examined in section 2 to what extent the logical principles play a role in Sextus’s argumentation. He appears to agree with two logical laws, which can be doubted (cf. section 1), which means that he can’t be characterised as a radical sceptic. To what extent, however, is radical

⁴⁸ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 114 (p. 174).

⁴⁹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 133 (p. 179).

⁵⁰ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 253 (p. 209; cf. section 2.1.3).

⁵¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 253 (p. 209).

⁵² Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 210 (p. 53).

⁵³ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, II, 111, 112 (p. 96).

⁵⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, II, 113 (p. 96).

scepticism possible? Is one able to forgo every reasonable criterion and suspend judgement in each instance? This will be inquired in this last section.

I have so far left the question about the status of the third logical law, the principle of identity, open, since it seems harder to undermine its position than that of the other two (cf. section 1). Sextus suspends, as appeared in section 2.2, his judgement concerning this issue, but is this possible? This principle has, in the course of time, been subjected to little doubt.

The radical thinker Cratylus is an exception. He seems (in the role he plays in Plato's dialogue which bears his name), following Heraclitus, to have claimed that something, while one speaks about it, changes so much that one no longer speaks of the same thing a moment later. This emerges in the context in which Socrates shows Cratylus the strange consequences of Cratylus's conclusion: "SOCRATES: (...) If [the beautiful] is always passing away, can we correctly say of it first that it is *this*, and then that it is *such and such*? Or, at the very instant we are speaking, isn't it inevitably and immediately becoming a different thing and altering and no longer being as it was? CRATYLUS: It is."⁵⁵ After that, Socrates concentrates on the epistemological implications Cratylus's conclusion has: "SOCRATES: (...) It isn't even reasonable to say that there is such a thing as knowledge, Cratylus, if all things are passing on and none remain."⁵⁶

In general, one may conclude that a continuity in thought is required to give an argumentation. After all, if one should want to consider earlier claims, this continuity must be supposed. This is of importance in the criticism of Sextus, since he supposes this as well: a prerequisite for his discourse is that the meanings are constant. He therefore – implicitly – agrees with the principle of identity, even though he claims to suspend his judgement in the matter.

The logical laws are not the only reasonable criteria one can maintain, of course. It is of importance to examine which other criteria are utilised in general and in Sextus's thoughts in particular. Hans Albert has pointed out that the need to find a basis for everything finally results in one of three alternatives (the so-called Münchhausen-Trilemma):

"Here, one has a mere choice between:

1. an infinite regression, which appears because of the necessity to go ever further back, but isn't practically feasible and doesn't, therefore, provide a certain foundation;
2. a logical circle in the deduction, which is caused by the fact that one, in the need to found, falls back on statements which had already appeared before as requiring a foundation, and which circle does not lead to any certain foundation either; and finally: **[Page 48]**
3. a break of searching at a certain point, which indeed appears principally feasible, but would mean a random suspension of the principle of sufficient reason."⁵⁷

The third alternative simply means clinging to a dogma; there is no talk of a situation in which reasonable criteria need play a role and this is not of importance here. The first two options, however, are. If one, in order to enervate a position, utilises the infinite regression or the circular reasoning, one reasons.

The relevance for Sextus's argumentation becomes apparent when one investigates the places where he utilises the first two alternatives. The central passage where the infinite regression receives attention is in book 1, in the treatment of the five modes: "In the mode deriving from infinite regress, we say that what is brought forward as a source of conviction for the matter proposed itself needs another such source, which itself needs another, and so *ad infinitum*, so that we have no point from which to begin to establish anything, and suspension of judgement follows."⁵⁸

A little further, the circle is dealt with, as the reciprocal mode: "The reciprocal mode occurs when what ought to be confirmatory of the object under investigation needs to be made convincing by the object under investigation; then, being unable to take either in order to establish the other, we suspend judgement about both."⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Plato, *Cratylus*, 439d (p. 155).

⁵⁶ Plato, *Cratylus*, 440a (p. 155).

⁵⁷ Albert, H., *Traktat über kritische Vernunft*, p. 15.

⁵⁸ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 166 (p. 41).

⁵⁹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 169 (p. 41).

Sextus uses both means on several occasions in his argumentation. An example of the infinite regression is given by him in the following:

“(…) Objects cannot be judged in virtue of [appearances]. If some, how shall we judge that it is right to find these appearances convincing and those unconvincing? For if without an appearance, then they will grant that appearances are redundant for judging, since they will be saying that some objects can be judged apart from them. But if with an appearance, how will they get hold of the appearance which they are adducing for judging the other appearances? And they will need another appearance in turn to judge this second appearance; and another to judge that, and so *ad infinitum*. But it is impossible to make infinitely many decisions. Therefore it is impossible to discover which appearances one must use as standards and which not.”⁶⁰

An instance in which the circle is used is the situation in which Sextus points out that one, in order to know the cause of a thing, must know its consequence and vice versa:

“(…) It is impossible to conceive of a cause before apprehending its effect as an effect of it; for we recognize that it is a cause of its effect only when we apprehend the latter as an effect. But we cannot apprehend the effect of a cause as its effect if we have not apprehended the cause of the effect as its cause; for we think that we know that it is its effect only when we have apprehended its cause as a cause of it. Thus if, in order to conceive of a cause, we must already have recognized its effect, and in order to know its effect, as I have said, we must already know the cause, the reciprocal mode of puzzlement shows that both are inconceivable: the cause cannot be conceived of as a cause nor the effect as an effect; for each of them needs to be made convincing by the other, and we shall not know from which to begin to form the concept. Hence we shall not be able to assert that anything is a cause of anything.”⁶¹ [Page 49]

The syllogism is discussed by Sextus as well, by the way. He states that conclusive arguments can't be grasped: “(…) Conclusive arguments are inapprehensible. For if they are judged by deciding whether the consequent of a conditional follows the antecedent, and if this has been subject to undecidable dispute and is no doubt inapprehensible (…), then conclusive arguments too will be inapprehensible.”⁶²

Meanwhile, Sextus utilises the syllogism himself when he argues that the proof is an object of disagreement: “(…) Proof (…) is an object of disagreement. If we suspend judgement about signs, and proofs are a sort of sign, then it is necessary to suspend judgement about proofs too.”⁶³

Sextus can only defend himself against the analysis presented above by treating everything, in the way described in section 2.2, as an appearance. Here, too, this treatment is insufficient, however. As Priest rightly observes: “By maintaining skepticism Sextus is (…) committed to the view that it is rationally defensible. (…) His solution is simple; he denies that he maintains skepticism [in the sense of academic philosophy, from which Sextus dissociates himself (cf. *Outlines of Scepticism*, I, 220-235 (p. 57-62)), J.D.]. He neither asserts nor denies it.”⁶⁴ This is no solution, however:

“Unfortunately Sextus now appears to be asserting something else (to the effect that he is not asserting anything); and this is equally contradictory. Sextus could maintain that he is not really asserting this either. But this would be (a) equally contradictory; and (b) disingenuous. For, in making this utterance, Sextus does intend us thereby to believe that he asserts nothing; and this is exactly what assertion amounts to.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, II, 76-78 (pp. 86, 87).

⁶¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III, 20-22 (p. 148).

⁶² Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, II, 145 (p. 105).

⁶³ Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, II, 134 (p. 102).

⁶⁴ Priest, G., *Beyond the limits of thought*, p. 51.

⁶⁵ Priest, G., *Beyond the limits of thought*, p. 52.

One may finally conclude that “(...) The attempt to avoid the contradiction at one limit of thought forces one into a contradiction at another.”⁶⁶

It seems, on account of the passages quoted in this section and the previous one, in which Sextus appears to hold on to reasonable criteria, justified to conclude that he is no radical sceptic since he does not always suspend judgement. Could he, however? Is radical scepticism, in which one suspends *every* judgement and deals with all appearances as appearances without agreeing with them, possible?

Pyrrho actually seems to have lived his life according to this guideline, dealing only with the appearances. According to Diogenes Laertius, Pyrrho really lived as a sceptic:

“He led a life consistent with this doctrine [that there is nothing really existent, but custom and convention govern human action, J.D.], going out of his way for nothing, taking no precaution, but facing all risks as they come, whether carts, precipices, dogs or what not, and, generally, leaving nothing to the arbitrament of the senses; but he was kept out of harm’s way by his friends who, as Antigonus of Carystus tells us, used to follow close after him.”⁶⁷

Although it is difficult to live like this, he seems at least to have tried to: “When a cur rushed at him and terrified him, he answered his critic that it was not easy entirely to strip oneself of human weakness; but one should strive with all one’s might against facts, by deeds if possible, and if not, in word.”⁶⁸ [Page 50]

Pyrrho didn’t write, either. In order to be a radical sceptic, one can’t claim anything, attempting thereby to reach beyond the level of appearances, since such a claim presupposes at least the continuity of the principle of identity. Moreover, in order to doubt everything, the means which one uses to doubt must be doubted, which means that (I now use an argument in which the infinite regression is utilised, but I haven’t characterised myself as a radical sceptic; I have, in fact, in the course of this article, utilised various criteria) one at no point has a means to commence doubting. Radical scepticism is not impossible, but if it is maintained, one can’t avoid having to stop thinking and to live without supposing continuity in life and frames for acting.

The only alternative to both this sort of scepticism on the one hand and dogmatism on the other consists in dealing pragmatically with the criteria one maintains. By this, I mean pragmatism in the sense that one generally suspends judgement, like the sceptic, maintaining, however, some criteria. This looks like scepticism, because one is willing to review his or her opinions if these become problematic, but differs from it since reason is accepted as a constant, covering and decisive authority.

This sort of pragmatism is, obviously, far from satisfactory, but it seems to me (at this moment) the only alternative. The criteria which have been discussed are maintained, but only as replaceable means. One may argue about the status of the principles of excluded middle and contradiction, but it seems that the principle of identity, the logical circle and the infinite regression, as these seem (at this moment) to be inevitable, need to be maintained. A sceptical attitude is not only possible, but desirable, too. A radical sceptical stance is possible as well, but it is doubtful whether this is just as desirable.

Conclusion

In this article, I have inquired to what extent Sextus Empiricus maintains reasonable criteria, in order to ascertain if he can be characterised as a sceptic and whether scepticism in its most radical form is possible.

In section 1, the basic logical laws were treated and it has been indicated why doubt about these is possible. The principles of excluded middle and contradiction are not maintained by all

⁶⁶ Priest, G., *Beyond the limits of thought*, *ibid*.

⁶⁷ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, pp. 474, 475 (9, 62).

⁶⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of eminent philosophers*, pp. 478, 479 (9, 66).

logicians. Sextus's clinging to all of these principles has been demonstrated in section 2; the manner in which he criticises dogmatists presupposes criteria. This is the basis of my criticism of Sextus. It was pointed out in three ways how the logical principles are of importance for Sextus. In section 2.1.1 on the one hand and sections 2.1.2 and 2.1.3 on the other, some passages were quoted in which he supports (or at least does not criticise) a certain argumentation which is based on these principles (section 2.1.1), or makes use of such an argumentation himself (section 2.1.2), or even explicitly agrees with the principles (section 2.1.3). In his criticism of the dogmatists, therefore, Sextus utilises criteria himself.

This is needed for his criticism, but it doesn't agree with the practise of a radical sceptic. This was expressed in section 2.2 as well. Sextus can't consistently [Page 51] maintain only to speak at the level of appearances, because this means that his argumentation doesn't become compelling. Not only the laws of logic, but some other reasonable criteria serve Sextus as well. In section 3 it was indicated which these are. This gives rise to expanding the criticism of Sextus. He seems to want something which is impossible: to be a sceptic and nevertheless hang on to criteria in order to have a method at his disposal to dispute the dogmatists. When he does this, he at the same time disputes himself.

Radical scepticism is, however, not impossible; one may live with only the appearances as a frame of reference. In fact, this is the only alternative to a situation in which one maintains criteria, irrespective of their nature. In the last part of the article, I have pleaded, on the other hand, for maintaining criteria, but in such a way that one deals with these pragmatically. No matter how persuasive the criteria one uses may seem to be, their value may, just as that of the principles of excluded middle and contradiction, be doubted in the future.

The title of this article is twofold. On the one hand, a sceptical attitude leads to the conclusion that many solutions in philosophy and other areas to questions of various sorts do not suffice. On the other hand, this attitude appears to be problematic itself in the sense that it accepts elements it disputes. The problems of scepticism are insoluble for any form of scepticism except for the radical kind. One may either resort to this or accept the problems and deal with the issues one is confronted with. I would, as indicated in section 3, like to plead a moderate kind of scepticism (pragmatism), in which one holds on to some (seemingly) inevitable criteria and further has a careful attitude.

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