

Reviews

Plínio Junqueira Smith, *Sextus Empiricus' Neo-Pyrrhonism: Skepticism as a Rationally Ordered Experience*. Cham: Springer, 2022, xvi + 372 pp.

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This is a rather ambitious book. Smith interprets the entirety of neo-Pyrrhonist philosophy as presented in the works of Sextus Empiricus, discussing all the central themes that have preoccupied scholars in recent decades, such as the nature of skeptical inquiry and suspension of judgment, skeptical methods, the skeptic's way of life, appearances and beliefs, imperturbability, etc. Smith largely adheres to the internal evidence found in Sextus, rarely commenting on external sources or the history of Pyrrhonism before Sextus. The book is written clearly and persuasively, and Smith demonstrates a thorough knowledge not only of Sextus but also of the voluminous interpretive literature.

Smith's central idea is that Pyrrhonism is not, as Myles Burnyeat once put it, "a paralysis of reason by itself".¹ On the contrary, according to Smith, there is a skeptical *logos* that governs both skeptical inquiry and the skeptics' overall attitude toward the world. Before I say more about the idea of skeptical *logos*, let me briefly present the structure of the book and some of its main findings.

The book is divided into two parts. In the first part (chs. 2–4), Smith offers a reconstruction of the origins of skepticism, as sketched by Sextus in *PH* 1.12, 1.26, and 1.29. Smith distinguishes three main protagonists in the story of the origins of skepticism. The first is the one whom Sextus calls a "talented person" (*megalophuês*), whose primary preoccupation is irregularity (*anômalia*) among things. Then emerges a *philosophos*, who has not yet adhered to any specific philosophical doctrine and is distressed by disagreement (*diaphônia*) among philosophical positions. While some *philosophoi* become dogmatists, holding beliefs about philosophical theories, the skeptic adopts an attitude of suspension of judgment and imperturbability (*ataraxia*). Smith's reconstruction is mainly speculative, but it can only be such given the conciseness of Sextus' description. Nonetheless, I find it quite convincing.

¹ M. Burnyeat, "Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?" In M. Burnyeat & M. Frede, eds., *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1998, p. 46, quoted by Smith at pp. 2, 115.

The book's second and much longer part (chs. 5–12) offers a comprehensive interpretation of Sextus' skepticism. In Ch. 5, Smith introduces the idea of skeptical *logos* as a mode of reasoning that governs skeptical attitudes and actions. The main elements of the skeptical attitude—such as the necessity of suspending judgment, achieving imperturbability, the specific method of inquiry, etc.—are intelligible only given the central role of skeptical *logos*. Guided by the idea of skeptical *logos* as the principle of skepticism, Smith offers interesting and sometimes novel interpretations of some of the central disputes in Pyrrhonian scholarship. For instance, a notorious problem is how to reconcile two seemingly radically different descriptions of the Pyrrhonist found in Sextus: as a continuous investigator and as one who suspends judgment about everything. Smith (Ch. 6) insists that these two descriptions are not contradictory. After suspending judgment and achieving imperturbability, the Pyrrhonist does the same thing as before: he seeks the truth. The difference is only in the Pyrrhonist's current preoccupation with maintaining imperturbability and remaining in a state of suspension of judgment. Suspending judgment is not just the outcome of inquiry but also a prerequisite for careful and patient investigation, which is characteristic of the skeptics: “[E]pochê has a double role to play: on the one hand, it preserves a necessary condition of investigation; on the other, it ensures that skeptical investigation is carried out properly, i. e., as a patient search after truth for the sake of truth” (p. 136).

Smith shows (Ch. 7) that, when defining skepticism as a kind of ability (*PH* 1.8, 1.11), Sextus should not be understood as referring to a reactive capacity to argue against what the dogmatists have put forward. Rather, the skeptical ability is two-sided: the skeptic himself presents both sides of the opposition. “The main skeptical principle, in requiring the skeptic to set up oppositions, requires him to use his ability to argue both for and against *p*” (p. 168). Hence, Pyrrhonism is not just a dialectical position setting up refutation. The further question is how exercising the ability to argue on both sides of a question leads to suspension of judgment. In Pyrrhonian scholarship, we find two answers to this question. On the one hand, some believe that, after establishing opposition, the skeptic is led to suspend judgment as a matter of causal or psychological necessity. On the other hand, suspension of judgment can be understood as something that, faced with the equipollent opposition, is *rational* for the skeptic to do, but since the skeptic has no rational commitments, suspension is merely a dialectical move. Smith (ch. 8) aims to argue that suspension is both a causal and a rational (but not just dialectical) outcome of skeptical ability. Skeptical activity is rational not because it is guided by certain theoretical commitments or principles or epistemic norms but because, in his inquiry, the skeptic adopts a kind of reasoning from everyday life which is based on the so-called commemorative signs.

In chs. 9–11, Smith further explains the skeptical commitment to everyday life. The skeptical *logos* leads the skeptics to use what appears as the criterion of action. By following what appears, they also follow everyday life. What is the relationship between what appears and everyday life? The prevailing view is that the domain of what appears corresponds to the domain of everyday life, while the domain of philosophy, or philosophical *logos*, as Sextus calls it, corresponds to the domain of what is non-evident. As opposed to this, Smith argues (Ch. 10) that the contrast between what appears and what is non-evident does not correspond to the contrast between ordinary life and philosophy. Ordinary people also hold opinions about non-evident things, just as in philosophy there are things that appear. Therefore, the question of whether the skeptics can insulate their stance from ordinary life is misguided. In Ch. 11, Smith tackles the vexed questions of skeptical beliefs (more on this below). He argues that not only can the skeptics have beliefs, but they can even claim to have knowledge about what appears, given that they accept everyday criteria of truth. They can even hold beliefs about some philosophical issues, such as questions about how many parts philosophy has, what their appropriate order is, etc.

The last chapter is devoted to the skeptical goals, imperturbability and moderation of feelings (*metriopatheia*). Sextus suggests that there are two types of distress that the skeptic hopes to overcome: distress arising from the conflict between opinions and distress arising from holding a single opinion, namely, the opinion that something is by nature good or bad. Smith argues that, correspondingly, imperturbability has two aspects: intellectual and moral. He also argues that moral imperturbability rests on holding the relativity of moral values because the skeptic can accept the values that appear to him in certain circumstances.

Let me now briefly address the central idea of the skeptical *logos*. Sextus introduces this idea in *PH* 1.17:

But if one says that a doctrine (*hairesis*) is an orientation (*agôgê*) which, according to what appears, follows a certain way of reasoning (*logos*), this way of reasoning showing how it is possible to seem to live correctly (where correctly is taken not only as referring to virtue but more simply) and reaching out to enable one to suspend judgment, then we say he [i. e. the skeptic] has a doctrine, for we follow a certain way of reasoning according to what appears that shows us a life in conformity with the customs of our country, with its laws and orientations and with our own conditions.²

This passage is too often overlooked in interpretations, and I agree with Smith that it contains the core of Sextus' position. Of course, much depends on how we trans-

² I quote Smith's translation (pp. 9, 108).

late the term “*logos*”, and the translations offered so far (“a certain line of reasoning”, “a certain rationale”, “some account”, “Lehre”, etc.; see Smith, p. 102) lead in different directions. Smith opts for “way of reasoning” or “line of reasoning”, and at times “skeptical rationale”. His idea is that the skeptical *logos* emerges as a result of the development of the skeptic described in the first part of the book. If such a *logos* had not emerged, the skeptic would live an ordinary life like everyone else but would not form a school and a specifically skeptical way of inquiry, and consequently would not be in a position to reform and improve ordinary life, which Sextus claims the skeptics do. In Smith’s words: “[T]he skeptical *logos* is: a particular way of reasoning, not a mere account; it is not superfluous, but essential; it is not redundant, but it guides the skeptic; it is also normative, not merely descriptive; and the skeptic is not a merely conditioned person, but he acts according to his way of reasoning” (p. 122). In short, the skeptic’s intellectual activity is directed, organized, and structured by a single principle, thanks to which skepticism manifests itself as a rationally *ordered* experience, as indicated in the subtitle of the book.

What is the relationship between skeptical *logos* and what Sextus calls “everyday practice” (*biôtikê tērêsis*) with its four components (nature’s guidance, necessitation of feelings, handing down of customs and laws, and teaching of kinds of expertise)? Smith most often writes as if the *logos* guides or leads the skeptic to live in accordance with everyday practice (pp. 259, 267, 331) or tells him to live in such a way (p. 258). This might suggest that the skeptical *logos* is conceptually or chronologically prior to the four basic components of everyday life. However, this certainly cannot be so, as the skeptic lived under the guidance of nature, feelings, customs, laws, and basic skills before becoming a skeptic. Besides, Sextus says in *PH* 1.17 that this *logos* shows (*hupodeiknunti*) a life in accordance with only two of the four components. However, Smith also states that “‘everyday observance’ is the skeptical way of reasoning” (p. 109, my italics). This seems far more appropriate. As I take it, the point is that the four components of everyday life are all the skeptics need to conduct skeptical inquiries and achieve their goal. Admittedly, Sextus does not explicitly say that these components can collectively be called “*logos*”. In addition, note that the quoted passage about skeptical *logos* is found in the part of *PH* in which Sextus discusses whether skepticism can be described using concepts characteristic of philosophy, such as holding *dogmata* (1.13–15), having a *hairesis* (16–17), engaging in natural science (18), having a criterion (21–24), and a goal (25–30). Therefore, he seeks to situate skepticism in relation to dogmatic philosophy and observes that, in some sense, skepticism constitutes a school with a specific *logos*, which is nothing over and above living according to the four components of everyday practice.

The other thing I would like to address is Smith’s understanding of skeptical beliefs. According to Smith (see p. 289), Sextus’ writings suggest the following clas-

sification. The broadest genus is belief (*pistis*) or assent, which is divided into two main types: (i) belief about what appears (empirical belief) and (ii) belief about non-evident things. Each of these types is further divided into two subtypes. Empirical belief can (i)(a) involve assent that is deliberate and accompanied by impulse, or (i)(b) it can be necessary and mild. Belief about non-evident things can be either (ii)(a) an everyday opinion (*doxa*) or (ii)(b) an opinion resulting from philosophical inquiry (*dogma*). The skeptics have only one type of belief, (i)(b): they assent to what appears, and do so without impulse.

While I agree that we can attribute beliefs about what appears to the skeptics, I am not sure that the relevant genus in the above classification is indeed *pistis*. As far as I can see, “*pistis*” in Sextus usually refers to conviction or trustworthiness. For instance, when he argues that opposed arguments are equal *kata pistin ê apistian*, he means that they are equal in terms of convincingness or lack of convincingness (*PH* 1.202). He also says that *peithesthai tini* can mean either following without resistance and strong inclination, which is characteristic of the Pyrrhonists, or assenting to something by choice, which is characteristic of Carneades and Clitomachus (*PH* 1.230). We can take this, like Smith, as a description of two types of belief, but I am more inclined to take this simply as a description of two senses in which one can go along with something or somebody: either by obeying or having confidence, like the Pyrrhonists, or by believing, like the Academics.³ If following without resistance and strong inclination is understood as a type of belief, then this type of belief aligns more or less with what Sextus describes in *PH* 1.13 as “acquiescing in something” and “assenting to the affections forced upon by appearances”—but this is not called “*pistis*”; rather, it is called “*dogma*”. If I understand Smith correctly, he denies that Sextus attributes *dogmata* to the skeptics in *PH* 1.13. However, he certainly attributes some form of assent to them and does not describe it as *pistis*.

Sextus Empiricus’ Neo-Pyrrhonism is a valuable contribution to Pyrrhonian scholarship. Both those beginning their study of Sextus and experienced scholars will surely benefit from the book. Unfortunately, the book is riddled with typographical errors, including inconsistency in transliteration of Greek terms. Moreover, there is a missing abstract of Ch. 4, and in its place, an abstract of Ch. 3 is repeated, indicating that the book was produced in haste.

3 Cf. J. Annas & J. Barnes, eds., *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 61 n. 253.