

A Note on a new Polish translation of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*

Zbigniew Nerczuk

Copernicus University (Toruń, Poland)

Email: zibbi@umk.pl

Sextus Empiricus, *Zarysy Pyrrońskie*, przełożył, wstępem i przypisami opatrzył Zbigniew Nerczuk, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK 2019, s. 407.¹

Outlines of Pyrrhonism (in short “PH”) - a treatise in three books written by a sceptic, Sextus Empiricus (II/III century AD), can certainly be recognized as a masterpiece of philosophy. Its importance is rather due not to its direct influence on the philosophy of Sextus’ times², but because of its impact on two ground-breaking periods: firstly, the Renaissance as a historical epoch when Sextus’ works were discovered, translated and widely read by humanists. And secondly, due to Sextus’ influence on the “revival” of scepticism in the second half of the 20th century.³

There are very few traces of the influence of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* on other works before the Renaissance.⁴ The situation changed significantly when Henricus Stephanus (Henri Estienne), a great humanist, translator and editor of i.a. Plato’s works, published a Latin translation of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in 1562.⁵ In 1569 Gentian Hervet published his translations of *Adversus dogmaticos* (in short “AD”) and *Adversus mathematicos* (“AM”)⁶, whereas

¹ The work on the project was financed by the National Science Centre and was approved by a decision no. DEC-2013/09/B/HS1/01996.

² Cf. Sextus Empiricus, PH, *Outlines of Scepticism*, eds. J. Annas, J. Barnes, “Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy”, Cambridge 2007⁷, p. xi

³ Cf. J. Barnes, *Pyrrhonism, Belief and Causation. Observation on the Scepticism of Sextus Empiricus*, „Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt”, II, 36, 4, (eds. W. Haase, H. Temporini) Berlin–New York 1990, p. 2608–2695: “scepticism is again in fashion” (p. 2608). On the importance of scepticism and overview of its stages in Polish cf. R. Ziemińska, *Historia sceptycyzmu. W poszukiwaniu spójności*, Toruń 2013.

⁴ Nevertheless, the influence of Pyrrhonism can be noticed in works of Plotinus, Gregory of Nazianzus, Julian the Apostate and neoplatonic commentators in the 5th and 6th century AD (cf. D. Machuca, *Sextus Empiricus: His Outlook, Works and Legacy*, “Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie” 55(1/2), 2008, p. 58).

⁵ Sexti philosophi Pyrrhoniarii hypotyposēōn libri III: quibus in tres philosophiae partes seuerissimè inquiritur; libri magno ingenii acumine scripti, uariāque doctrina referti; graecè nunquam, latinè nunc primum editi / interprete Henrico Stephano. Anno M. D. LXII ([Parisiis]: Excudebat idem Henricus Stephanus, illustris viri Huldrici Fuggeri typographus.

⁶ Sexti Empirici viri longe doctissimi Aduersus mathematicos: hoc est, aduersus eos qui prositentur disciplinas, opus eruditissimum, complectens vniuersam Pyrrhoniarii acutissimorum philosophorum disputandi de quibuslibet disciplinis & artibus rationem, Graecè nunquam Latinè nunc primum editum, Gentiano Herueto Aurelio interprete; eiusdem Sexti Pyrrhoniarii hypotyposēōn libri tres: quibus in tres philosophiae partes seuerissimè inquiritur. Libri

in 1621 a Greek edition of Sextus' works was released with their Latin translation.⁷ Afterwards, Sextus' texts had a profound influence on the development of modern philosophy⁸ and, to quote Diego Machuca, they are "the key to understanding the origin and development of early modern philosophy".⁹ Thanks to these works, philosophical discussions that took place in the 17th century shifted their focus from metaphysics to epistemology.¹⁰ Even though the scope and strength of influence of the Sextus' writings are still under debate, the presence of sceptic reminiscences in the works of such philosophers as Michel de Montaigne, René Descartes, Blaise Pascal, Pierre-Daniel Huet, François De La Mothe Le Vayer, David Hume is indisputable.¹¹

Undoubtedly, scepticism has been of particular interest among philosophers over the last few decades.¹² The philosophical shift to epistemology and logical analysis has been a reason for intensification and widened scope of research on the works of Sextus Empiricus. Sextus started to be perceived not only as doxographer or the primary source of our knowledge on Pyrrhonism, but also as a representative of an important philosophical tradition that is interesting *per se*. Sextus' works have been recognized for a large amount of argumentation and have been analysed from the perspective of their logical value, the correctness of argumentation and their persuasive power. The growing interest in Sextus has contributed to translations of his works into various languages.

Despite the great interest in Sextus around the world, Polish literature did not have much to offer. In the previous century a Polish reader could find only two full Sextus' translations: of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* by Adam Krokiewicz¹³ and *Against the Logicians* by

magno ingenij acumine scripti, veriaque doctrina referti: Graece nunquam, Latine nunc primum editi, interpretate Henrico Stephano; accessit & Pyrrhonis vita, ex Diogene Laertio, ex vulgata interpretatione, sed multis in locis castigata; item, Claudij Galeni Pergameni contra Academicos & Pyrrhonios, D. Erasmo Roterodamo interprete, Parisiis: Apud Martinum Iuuenem, via S. Ioannis Lateranensis, ad insigne serpentis, M. D. LXIX. Cum privilegio Regis.

⁷ SECTOU EMPEIRIKOU TA SWZOMENA. Sexti Empirici opera quae extant. Magno ingenii acumine scripti, Pyrrhoniaram Hypotyposeon libri III. Quibus in tres philosophiae partes acerrime inquiruntur, Henrico Stephano interprete, Adversus Mathematicos, hoc est, eos qui disciplinas profitentur, libri X, Gentiano Herveto Aurelio interprete, Graece nunc primum editi. Adiungere visum est Pyrrhonis Eliensis Philosophi vitam: nec non Claudii Galeni Pergameni De optimo docendi genere librum, quo adversus Academicos Pyrrhoniosque disputat. Ms. nostri varias lectiones et coniecturas aliquot margini insertas operi praefiximus. Indicibus item necessariis opus locupletavimus. Genevae. Typis ac sumptibus Petri et Jacobi Chouet, MDCXXI.

⁸ R. Popkin, *A History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, Berkeley 1972. On the rediscovery of Sextus in the 16th century cf. L. Floridi, *Sextus Empiricus: The Transmission and Recovery of Pyrrhonism*, Oxford 2002.

⁹ D. Machuca, op. cit., p. 29.

¹⁰ Cf. Annas/Barnes, p. xi.

¹¹ Cf. the discussion presented by Diego Machuca on Richard Popkin's opinion (op. cit., p. 58–61).

¹² Machuca (op. cit.) dates back this growing interest to the 1980s.

¹³ *Sextusa Empirikusa „Zarysów Pirrońskich” księga pierwsza, druga i trzecia. Przetłumaczył i wstępem poprzedził Adam Krokiewicz*, Kraków 1931.

Izydora Dąmbska.¹⁴ Then, this list was extended with the translation of *Against the Professors*¹⁵ and of the remaining books of *Against the Dogmatists*, i.e. treatises *Against the Physicists* and *Against the Ethicists*.¹⁶

The only Polish translation of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* by Adam Krokiewicz came out in 1931. It created great controversy at the time of publication, followed by a discussion between the translator and another recognized Polish scholar Walter Auerbach. The discussion was generated by Krokiewicz's translation style and his unique philosophical and philological insight, which was an incentive for him to do etymological research and experiment with word formation.¹⁷

The presented translation is not so much marked by an individual approach to the text as Krokiewicz's, as it aims at maintaining clarity and accordance with terminological tradition. Sextus' style does not prompt translators to experiment with language¹⁸. The style and the language of the *Outlines* is simple and adapted to its content. It is neither rhetorical nor complicated as regards syntax or vocabulary. Repeatability of schemas as well as an established scope of used terminology indicate that Sextus follows a certain tradition which developed its own linguistic, syntactic and argumentative convention. Extraordinary elements, such as wit, irony and literary quotes appear quite rarely. Sextus' style is as impersonal and devoid of emotions as his self-presentation.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that translation of Sextus' treatises is an easy task. The difficulty in translating Sextus' works and philosophical texts from the late antiquity in general is caused by the rich and long-established philosophical tradition, a variety of sources from which they draw, and a multitude of texts they refer to. Hence, the philosophical terminology in Sextus' works may seem sometimes confusing, ambiguous and inconsistent.

Our understanding of Greek thought, based on textbook rules, as well as adopted terminological conventions formed in us a habit of associating provided terms with an established tradition and widely accepted terminology. However, unambiguity and terminological consistency are not so obvious in Sextus' work. Its reader must remember that

¹⁴ Sekstus Empiryk, *Przeciw logikom*, translation, introduction, notes and a glossary by I. Dąmbska, Warszawa 1970.

¹⁵ Sekstus Empiryk, *Przeciw uczonym*, translation, introduction and commentary by Z. Nerczuk, Kęty 2007.

¹⁶ Sekstus Empiryk, *Przeciw fizykom. Przeciw etykom*, translation, introduction and annotations by Z. Nerczuk, Kęty 2010.

¹⁷ Cf. Walter Auerbach's review of Krokiewicz's translation: *Sextusa Empiriku „Zarysów Pirrońskich” księga pierwsza, druga i trzecia. Przetłumaczył i wstępem poprzedził Adam Krokiewicz. Kraków 1931. Nakładem Polskiej Akademii Umiejętności. Str. XV. 172*, „Ruch Filozoficzny” 13(1–4), 1935, p. 6a–8a and a Krokiewicz's reply: A. Krokiewicz, *W sprawie polskiego przekładu Sextusa*, „Przegląd Filozoficzny” 37, 1935, p. 240–248.

¹⁸ Annas/Barnes, p. xiv–xv: “They are also well written. Sextus' Greek is simple: his vocabulary is restrained, his syntax pellucid. Irony, and even sarcasm, are occasionally detectable; but the rhetorical trowel is not one of Sextus' implements. Sentences are sometimes complicated (for Sextus sometimes has complicated arguments to express); but they are never convoluted, nor tortured. [...] Sextus' style is professional, and perfectly adapted to his matter”.

The chronological order in which Sextus wrote his works is widely discussed. The thesis that a treatise *Against the Professors* was created later than *Against the Dogmatists* (“AD”) is rather widely accepted (despite some hardly justified objections), which is supported by references to *Against the Dogmatists* that are present in the former of these works.¹⁹

The problem of relative chronology of PH and the preserved part of AD (*Against the Mathematicians*, in short “AM”, VII–XI) is much more controversial. Despite rich comparative material in form of numerous parallel passages in both texts, researchers remain divided over this issue: the majority of them refrain from expressing any opinion, others, in line with orthodoxy, claim that PH was written earlier than AD²⁰, whereas some put forward a thesis that AD is prior to PH.²¹ On the basis of Translator’s experiences while working on translation of AM IX–XI (AD) and PH, it may be argued that PH was created later, as some argumentations used in *Outlines* are so compressed that it is in some cases necessary to compare parallel reasoning included in AD so as to understand their content. Thus comparison of parallel passages may suggest that most of the argumentation in PH is a compiled and compressed version of argumentation included in AD.²²

Another observation concerns the structure of the *Outlines*. Sextus’ treatise in modern editions comprise three books, which are divided into chapters, and then into sections. Division into three books is definitely Sextus’ own idea, as he himself refers to it a few times²³. The sections were introduced by Fabricius in his edition of Sextus’ treatises²⁴ and became a standard way of giving references to Sextus’ works.

The origin of a division into chapters with their headings is a subject of controversy. J. Annas and J. Barnes claim that this division “is probably coming from Sextus himself”²⁵. However, in Translator’s view, two counterarguments can be adduced against this thesis. Firstly, in PH we can find headings which are misleading and divide the text in a certainly incorrect manner²⁶. Secondly, Sextus personally comments on the construction of the PH and

¹⁹ Cf. D. Machuca, op. cit., p. 37; AM I 26, 29, 33, 35, 282; AM II 106; AM III 116; AM VI 52, 58, 61.

²⁰ Esp. Karel Janáček on the basis of stylistic and terminological comparisons (cf. *Sextus Empiricus’ Sceptical Method*, Prague 1975).

²¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*, p. xxiv.

²² Worth mentioning is also the argument advanced by Fernanda Declava Caizzi (*Sesto e gli scettici*, in: “Elenchos” 13, 1992, p. 279–327, 284, annotation 11), who points out that if *Commentaries* mentioned in PH I 222 are “Sceptical commentaries” which are equated with AD, then we must consequently presume that AD is prior to PH.

²³ Cf. PH I 241; PH II 258; PH III 279.

²⁴ Annas/Barnes, xxxiv: “The section division is modern, first appearing (I think) in the elegant edition published by A. Fabricius in 1718.”

²⁵ Annas/Barnes, xiv: “The discussion is divided into chapters, the division probably coming from Sextus himself.”, a także Annas/Barnes, xxxiv: “The book division certainly, and the chapter division probably derive from Sextus.”

²⁶ Cf. e.g. a wrong heading in PH III 188 (“What is an art of living”) or a heading in PH I 36 (“The Ten Modes”), which Annas/Barnes advise to put before PH I 35.

the structure of Book I. The whole treatise is divided into “a general account” (Book I) and “a specific account” (Books II and III)²⁷. The general account, according to Sextus, covers the concept of scepticism²⁸, its origin and principles²⁹, arguments³⁰, standard³¹, aim³², modes of suspension of judgement³³, how sceptical assertions are understood³⁴, and the distinction between scepticism and neighbouring philosophies.³⁵ Nearly the same structure of Book I (with only one difference) is repeated by Sextus in PH I 209.³⁶ This example derived from Book I shows that Sextus’ own idea of the division of the treatise differs from the one marked by chapters. The problem of “internal” composition of PH would require a separate study, but it should be underlined that a full reconstruction of Sextus plan would allow for revealing the original text structure, which, in Translator’s view, was lost due to the introduction of chapters that subdivide the text.

The last issue addressed in this short note is the view of the history of philosophy presented in Sextus’ work. In Sextus’ writings we can find many valuable quotes, paraphrases, or references that broaden our knowledge of Greek philosophy. Yet, Sextus is not only a doxographer. His treatises, especially PH, picture a particular view of the history of Greek philosophy, and, interestingly, it is a view that significantly differs from this which we regard as a standard exposition of the history of philosophy. It is no use applying the view of the history of Greek philosophy established by Hegelian school in the 19th century with its division into subsequent development stages and breakthroughs connected with Socrates’, Plato’s and Aristotle’s thoughts. There is only a passing reference to Socrates in PH, whereas Plato’s thought is mentioned only with regard to the theory of things *in fluxu*. Aristotle’s philosophy is also of minor significance, as it is referred to only three times in the overview of physical theories. Instead, in PH we find extensive presentation of Stoic and Epicurean ideas,

²⁷ Cf. I 5-6. This dual structure can be found also in other Sextus’ works (cf. a notice in AM PR. 7–8; AM VII 1–2 [it can be inferred from Sextus’ words that the general part preceding the detailed exposition included in AM VII–XI was lost], AM IX 1–3).

²⁸ “The definition” is discussed in a passage PH I 7–11.

²⁹ Cf. PH I 12.

³⁰ Commenting on this part, Annas/Barnes notice that this list does not include any information on the issues present in the passage PH I 13–20. However, it seems to be a well-based assumption that *lo/goi* are here a reference to the sceptical manner of expression (“not-dogmatising”), which is discussed in a passage PH I 13–15.

³¹ Cf. PH I 21–24.

³² Cf. PH I 25–30.

³³ Cf. PH I 31–186.

³⁴ Cf. PH I 187–209.

³⁵ Cf. PH I 210–241.

³⁶ There are mentioned “parts” instead of “origin and principles”. It remains unclear which part of the text Sextus describes in this way, since we do not find any explanation of this term in Book I. A reference to this problem is made in PH II 12–13. It may be a result of the fact that PH’s text was redrafted and a mention of “branches of philosophy” might have been made primarily in Book I or it may be a reference to the structure of a lost part of *Adversus dogmaticos* (I–V), as PH’s Book I seems to be its redrafted version.

as well as the whole list of the figures which are also completely unknown to us or considered to be of lesser importance, such as Xenias, Oenopides, Hippo of Rhegium, Onomacritus, Diodorus Cronus, Menodotus of Nicomedia and others.

Sextus' view of the sceptic tradition is also far from textbook standards. Pyrrho is presented rather as a legendary founder of Scepticism than a prominent figure and philosopher, Aenesidemus is an exponent of unorthodox sceptical stance. Paradoxically this is a philosophy of Arcesilaus which is shown close to the sceptical tradition (with some differences pointed out). Sextus' report demonstrates how questionable is a textbook discussion of the sceptical tradition and how many generalizations are required to build any universal and coherent history of Scepticism.

The above mentioned issues prove that the view of philosophy preserved in Sextus' writings is an extremely interesting subject of research. The discrepancy between Sextus' view and the standard of the history of Greek philosophy, applicable from the 19th century to date (which is a quite bizarre construction) should make us think about the prevailing schema and create some mistrust in clichés and "compelling" historical opinions and generalizations. The prerequisite for this is the rejection of belief in superiority of our absolutizing reconstruction and the rejection of conviction that Sextus' view of the history of philosophy is a result of author's ignorance or the character of his sources. Sextus certainly knows about the disputes that took place in antiquity more than we do on the grounds that he is their direct participant. Hence, Sextus' treatises should be researched with a broad mind, with a firm conviction that they reveal a unique historical-philosophical perspective, which should not be adapted to our existing schemas, but rather should encourage us to ponder how much this perspective enriches and modifies our view on Greek philosophy.