

Critical Notice

Casey Perin's *The Demands of Reason*

Tad Brennan

Cornell University
tad.brennan@cornell.edu

The Demands of Reason: An Essay on Pyrrhonian Scepticism. By Casey Perin.
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This slim volume has large ambitions. Perin, who has published a number of excellent articles on ancient epistemology, here devotes a monograph to a defense of the coherence of Sextus Empiricus's scepticism—a carefully qualified defense, but a defense nonetheless. In the process he carves out distinctive positions on a number of familiar questions. The defense is intelligent and philosophically agile, the results are useful and clarifying, and the book will do much to advance the study of Sextus. After summarizing its accomplishments, I shall express reservations about some of its claims. But I should say that I think it is one of the best books on Sextus to have appeared in the last several decades.

The book contains an introduction and four chapters, followed by a brief but substantive conclusion:

Introduction (pp. 1–6)

Chapter 1: “The Search for Truth” (pp. 7–32)

Chapter 2: “Necessity and Rationality” (pp. 33–58)

Chapter 3: “The Scope of Scepticism” (pp. 59–85)

Chapter 4: “Appearances and Action” (pp. 86–113)

Conclusion (pp. 114–121)

“Introduction”: Here Perin explains the two qualifications to his defense of Sextus. First, Perin does not undertake to interpret all of Sextus’s surviving *oeuvre*, only the three volumes of the *Outlines* (PHI–III). Second, Perin does not defend every thread and theme in the patchwork of positions that Sextus advances, only the most central and interesting ones (about which more below). Perin also provides (4–5) an excellent synoptic preview of the chapters to come.

“Chapter 1: The Search for Truth”: This chapter is largely drawn from Perin’s 2006 *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* article, “Pyrrhonian Scepticism and the Search for Truth.” In the first half of the chapter, Perin defends Sextus Empiricus against a charge of insincerity: that even though the Sceptic claims to continue looking for the truth, in fact he has no motivation to do so. The second half provides a defense against a different sort of threat to Sextus, namely the worry that some of his Sceptical methods, the Agrippan modes in particular, are so powerfully undermining of all belief that Sextus could not have thought successful investigation was even a possibility.

“Chapter 2: Necessity and Rationality”: Faced with equipollent arguments, the Sceptic necessarily suspends judgment. Necessarily? Why necessarily, and in what sense of necessity? Perin argues that the sense at issue involves an obligation consequent on the Sceptic’s continued pursuit of truth via rational methods. Suspension in response to equipollence is a demand of reason, and reason still guides the Sceptic’s investigations.

“Chapter 3: The Scope of Scepticism”: Sextus says that in one sense of belief the Sceptic has no beliefs, but, in another sense, the Sceptic does have beliefs. What is the distinction here, and what does it amount to? What can Sceptics believe, consistent with their use of sceptical arguments? Perin argues that the Sceptic has no beliefs about how things actually are, but will have beliefs about how things appear.

“Chapter 4: Appearances and Action”: Here Perin faces the common accusation against Sceptics, that if they consistently eschew all belief then they cannot engage in any actions. Perin distinguishes two versions of this accusation: that the Sceptic cannot act at all, and that the Sceptic cannot act in a recognizably human way. Perin considers variants of this second charge where the richer notion of distinctively human action is fleshed out, in turn, by theories of human action inspired by the Stoics, Davidson, and Frankfurt. Perin argues that Sextus has resources to rebut the charge of complete inaction, but that his system will not provide for action that is fully human in a richer sense; “and this, it seems to me, is the fundamental problem with Scepticism” (113). Even the Sceptic’s success against the easier

charge does not look to be smooth sailing. Perin thinks that in order to avoid utter inactivity, Sextus must be able to articulate (as his surviving writings do not) a notion of appearances that will have the “action-guiding feature of belief” (97), while lacking the “belief-making feature of a belief” (98). This proposal sounds a bit like an advertisement for a risk-free sleeping pill that has the dormitive powers of opium without the opium-making features of opium—exceedingly indefinite both as to its contents and its coherence. But Perin’s discussion is interesting nonetheless.

“Conclusion”: Using the results of the earlier chapters, Perin argues that Sextan scepticism is a fundamentally reason-governed philosophical stance. In particular, it is not anti-rational in the sense of abandoning or disparaging the role of reason in the conduct of life or the search for truth. Here Perin takes particular aim at interpretations offered by Striker, Cooper, Annas, and Nussbaum, arguing that they have misinterpreted and misrepresented Sextus and the Sextan Sceptic. Though only eight pages, this concluding chapter plays an important role in the book as a whole. By invoking the results of the four earlier chapters in its rejection of the anti-rationalist reading, it shows the coherence of Perin’s underlying vision: the entire book has been devoted to showing that Sextus makes himself accountable to the demands of reason.

In the balance of the review, I want to raise two questions for particular claims that Perin makes, and then express a general concern about his approach.

I.

The first chapter entertains, and then rejects, the allegation that Sextus cannot be searching for the truth because the power and universality of his modes will convince him that suspension is inescapable. Perin considers versions of this charge both for the Agrippan modes (27–32) and for the “Possibility Argument” of *PHI*.³⁴ (19–20), which argues that we should suspend our assent to *P*, despite our current lack of arguments against it, because of the possibility of some future argument against it (19–20).

Perin does not think the Agrippan modes preclude future assent, because he thinks they cannot be applied to self-evident propositions. “For the charge of mere assertion, and so the hypothetical mode, can be successfully applied only to a reason whose truth is not self-evident...” (29). So if the Sceptic is undogmatic about the possibility of there being self-evident truths, then he will be equally undogmatic about the possibility of some

future piece of self-evident knowledge surviving the Agrippan modes: if it's self-evident, apparently, they can't get a grip on it.

Agrippa, and the modern epistemologists who have found his modes compelling, will be very surprised to hear that his inescapable net has such a large hole in it: all along, it was powerless against the self-evident! I am sorry to say that I find this totally implausible. Indeed, it seems to me that swatting away claims of self-evidence was one of the central purposes for which the Mode of Hypothesis was designed: when you assert some claim as self-evident, the Sceptic just asserts the contradictory as self-evident. (Perin expends some subtlety on 31 fn. 24 trying to argue otherwise, but without success).

Addressing the Possibility Argument, Perin first concedes that “[g]iven the availability of the possibility argument and given what the Sceptic takes to be its force, his investigation cannot end in anything but suspension of judgement” (20). But because he thinks this concession is fatal to the Sceptic's sincere ongoing search for truth, Perin argues that “another, deflationary reading is plausible as well” (20). On this reading, some future Sceptic might not be moved by the Possibility argument: “...it is possible that some Sceptics will not find the possibility argument persuasive. The passage at *PH* I.33–34 does not require, as far as I can see, that according to Sextus every Sceptic will find the possibility argument as persuasive as any argument against which it is employed” (20). Thus the argument from some possible future argument meets the reply from some possible future Sceptic. Such a Sceptic, unmoved by the Possibility Argument, might be led to assent; and so the search for truth is sincere.

Something like this move seems to be envisioned for the Agrippan Modes as well, when Perin considers a Sceptic who “suspends judgement about whether every application of the Agrippan strategy will be successful” (31).

Now, if Perin wants to say that some Sceptic might suspend judgment about the future success of every application of the Agrippan modes or the Possibility Argument—that some future Sceptic faced with the arguments that Sextus finds ineluctable, will instead respond with a shrug and a “Perhaps”—then this is a route open to him. After all, what we find logically ineluctable, some Sceptic may find doubtful: perhaps when faced with *Modus Ponens* itself some Sceptic will shrug and say “Perhaps.”

But if that is the basis of the Sceptic's insouciance about the Agrippan Modes, then there was no need for the implausible special pleading about “self-evidence.” And furthermore, the cost of this move for Perin's overall campaign is going to be very high. For by positing these possible Sceptics

who are unmoved by the Modes, Perin calls into question whether being a Sceptic really does involve being responsive to the demands of reason.

Recall the dialectic: Sextus himself treats the Agrippan and Possibility Arguments as decisive, and he commends them to his dogmatic opponents as decisive, as rendering assent rash and irrational. It is this that leads critics to question whether Sextus can still be seeking the truth, if he has branded any possible future assent as irrational. Perin then conjures up a possible future Sceptic who can assent because unmoved by the Modes.

But either Sceptics, qua Sceptic, are responsive to the norms of rationality that bind other rational agents, or they are not. When Sextus urges the Modes against his opponents, it looks as though he means to bind them with the bonds of rationality: they must suspend, on pain of irrationality. If that is the force of his address, then these arguments apply with equal binding force to any possible future Sceptic worthy of that name, i.e., any future agent who subscribes to the same demands of reason that are (in Perin's view) essential to what it is to be a Sextan Sceptic. Any future agent who opts out of those norms can no longer be carrying out the same Sceptical project in any case, and so their assent cannot show how a real Sceptic might attain the truth.

One can of course read Sextus wholly otherwise, so that he makes only a pretense of binding other rational agents, whether his Sceptical heirs and assigns or his current dogmatic opponents. Then the rhetoric of irrationality is only that—a kind of jargon that he mouths ironically, because he thinks that his listeners may take it seriously even if he does not. In that case, there is nothing to stop a possible future Sceptic from meeting the Modes, or rationality itself, with a contemptuous shrug. But this is evidently not how Perin wants to read Sextus. If he wants his Sceptics to be respecters of reason, then he needs to show how it can be rational for some future Sceptic to shrug off the Modes and other master arguments, and then show why it is still rational for Sextus in the present to treat them as inescapable. Respecters of reason do not lay down one rational law for their opponents and grant their future successors special exemptions.

Put this differently: if it is “negative dogmatism,” as Perin claims on 115, to think that the Agrippan modes will continue to work in the future, then why is it not “negative dogmatism” to think that *Modus Ponens* will continue to work in the future? What about the Law of Non-Contradiction? What about the demands of reason themselves—is it “negative dogmatism” to think that they will continue to apply to oneself and others in the future? There is a tension here between Perin's desire to make the Sceptic

accountable to rationality, and his desire to provide the Sceptic with future loopholes.

II.

The other topic of the first chapter concerns motivation: why do Sceptics pursue truth, once they have found tranquility? Here the dialectic is set by two texts: *PH* I.1–4, which tells us that the continuing search for truth is constitutive of what it is to be a Sceptic, and *PH* I. 25–30, which tells us that tranquility is the Sceptic's end.

Relying on the second text, critics have argued that truth was never more than an instrumental value for Sextus—he sought to grasp truth merely in order to attain tranquility thereby—and the Sceptic's experience has shown it to be a dispensable instrument in any case: he has attained tranquility by means of suspension, without attaining truth first. What need, then, of any further search for truth? Indeed, how can further search be rational, when it is not mandated by the end, i.e., the standard that determines which activities are and are not rational to undertake?

In opposition to this, Perin emphasizes the first text, insisting that any abandonment of the search for truth would make Sextus a negative, dogmatic Sceptic. (I argued a similar line in my 1999 book, and was pleased to see Perin note our agreement, p. 8 fn. 1.)

Perin's answer to the motivation question is that truth has both instrumental value and *per se* value for the Sceptic (“for its own sake”, 24; “as an end in itself”, 26). Accordingly, the Sceptic who attains tranquility plus truth has more *per se* goods than the Sceptic who attains tranquility without truth. This presupposes that suspension itself is not a good, and for the Sceptics that Perin focuses on this is correct. Sextus notes (*PH* I.30) that some other prominent Sceptics actually made suspension part of the end, and thus a *per se* good (Perin is confused on this point, 11), but he distances himself from them and leaves suspension out of his end.

At this point, Perin's opponents will press their own proof text and ask why the Sceptic's end does not mention truth, if it is indeed a *per se* good. Perin has an answer (27): the *telos*-formula is not an accounting of all of the *per se* goods, only of those *per se* goods that are not also instrumental goods. When Sextus writes (*PH* I.25) “a *telos* is that for the sake of which everything is done or contemplated, but it [is done etc.] for the sake of nothing,” it is tempting to take the second clause as merely epexegetic of the first, as indicating that whatever is a *per se* good cannot also be instrumental

(this would be the natural parsing in the context of Epicureanism, for instance). But Perin offers a different parsing, on which the second clause is an independent, additional criterion for inclusion in the end. Only goods that are (1) *per se* and (2) not instrumental are included in the end, but it is still possible for other *per se* goods to be instrumental goods as well. Truth is both, and this explains why it is left out of the *telos*-formula, but also why the Sceptic can pursue it as a *per se* good, worth having independently of its (now obviated) role in the attainment of tranquility.

So far, Perin wins this round. The distinction between those *per se* goods that are also instrumental and those that are strictly *per se* is a coherent one, and the parsing of the *telos*-formula according to which it contains only the strictly *per se* is a viable reading of *PH* I.25.

However, this interpretation raises two other problems for the Sceptic's end. Perin does not consider them, and Sextus himself does not give us enough material to construct an answer.

I begin with the fact that Sextus presents his end as a kind of conservative hold-over from his earlier, pre-Sceptical days: he began philosophizing with this end in mind, and he has the same end even now (*akhri nun*). For this reason the Sceptic's end needs to play the same structural roles that other, dogmatic ends play—a conclusion that also follows from Sextus's desire to put it into competition with other dogmatic ends, and win dogmatists over to his cause. And there are two structural roles that are hard to square with Perin's account of the end.

First there is the use of the end as a universal canon of rationality in action, what Epicurus means in *Ep. Men.* 127 when he talks of “referring every choice and avoidance” to the end. If you espouse an end, then every one of your actions should be capable of rationalization in light of it, and whatever is not conducive to your end is irrational to pursue. But on Perin's account, the Sceptic's end cannot play that role. There are two, divergent canons of rational action: an action is rational if it is for the sake of the end, or, alternatively, if it is for the sake of some *per se* good not included in the end. This kind of structural bifurcation was treated as a serious problem in antiquity; it was the basis for attacks on Stoics (*vis-à-vis* preferences) and Epicureans (*vis-à-vis* friendship), when critics alleged that they treated something as a *per se* good that was not included in their end.

Perin may reply that truth is, after all, being pursued for the sake of the end, but this seems to me true only at the level of type, and not true of every token pursuit of truth on every occasion when the Sceptic claims to pursue it. If I have already attained tranquility with respect to this very proposition

P by suspending judgment about *P*, then my interest in the truth of *P* can no longer be attributed to my desire to attain tranquility with respect to *P*. The fact that some other bit of truth may be instrumental to some other bit of tranquility does not enable me to use the instrumental justification on this occasion; and so this pursuit of truth no longer relates correctly to the final end.

The other problem with Perin's account of the Sceptic's end comes when we consider the ideal of sufficiency or *autarkeia*. It seems to have been axiomatic among the schools that whoever has the end has everything of genuine value, a life lacking in nothing. And yet Perin's Sceptics, who have the end of tranquility, are still lacking a *per se* good that they themselves take to be of significant value—sufficient value to rationalize a life devoted to argument, enquiry, and the writing of lengthy books like *Adversus Mathematicos*. So is the Sceptic still lacking an important *per se* good? If not, then they have no reason to search. If so, then their attainment of the Sceptic's end is that much less attractive, and their boast of having attained what all philosophers set out to acquire is that much less persuasive. How will they recruit others to their sect, when they must admit that even achieving the end of Scepticism leaves one short of possessing all of the *per se* goods, the ones it is rational to pursue?

Both of these concerns show why it is natural to read *PH* I.25 as articulating an end that is complete and *autarkes*, and includes all of the *per se* goods within its scope. This in turn means treating the second clause as merely exegetic of the first, so that whatever is good for its own sake cannot also be instrumental, and whatever is not contained in the *telos* itself is not a *per se* good. This is the traditional way of understanding the role of truth in Sextus, i.e., that since it is not part of the end, and since the end contains all the *per se* goods, truth can only be instrumentally valuable, and superfluous once the end has been attained.

There is also, finally, the fact that Sextus tells us (*PH* I.26) what his motivation was for pursuing truth from the very outset: he did it “in order to attain tranquility” (*hôte ataraktêsai*). *Punkt*. This was the place, if anywhere, for Sextus to explain that he has always sought truth both for its tranquilizing effects and for its own sake, too. But he says nothing of the sort.

And this, in turn, leaves us with the problem of reconciling the Sceptic's continued pursuit of truth with the Sceptic's account of the end. Perin's proposal does not yield an account of the Sceptic's end that would meet ancient expectations of what an end must do. The discussion in this chapter is stimulating and intelligent, but the solution does not succeed.

III.

Now I should like to discuss Perin's decisions about which aspects of Sextus to interpret. I sympathize with Perin's decision to focus on the limited corpus of *PH* I–III, setting aside both other ancient sceptics, and other parts of Sextus's own corpus. *PH* I–III contains most of the direct evidence for Sextus's attitude towards his own philosophizing. And by setting aside Sextus's works *Against the Mathematicians*, Perin can avoid embroilment in developmental questions about whether *PH* precedes or follows *AM*, whether they present the same account or differ, and so on. It takes an immense effort to make sense of *PH*, all by itself; and any progress here can then serve as a basis for later attempts on the other parts of Sextus, and other issues in ancient scepticism. This is a defensible way to start.

The limitation to selected themes in Sextus strikes me as more controversial. It certainly stems from a controversial premise: that the entire system of Sextus's views is finally and irredeemably incoherent. Here I let Perin speak:

I have come to think that a comprehensive interpretation of Scepticism—an interpretation that makes the way of life and the kind of philosophy described in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* fully coherent—is not possible. (5–6)

Having abandoned the hope of vindicating all of Sextus's views, Perin provides a rationale for defending a limited set of them: "...it seems to me that in the *Outlines* some features or aspects of Scepticism are far more prominent than others" (6). Luckily, the same features that are "more prominent" have a further claim on our attention: they are the features "that seem to me at least to be of special philosophical significance" (2).

What Perin offers, then, is a defense of the most prominent and philosophically significant aspects of the philosophy and way of life presented in the *Outlines*.

What this means in practice, however, is that Perin sometimes takes a very short way with contradictory evidence. Consider, for instance, his treatment of *PH* I.26–27, the passage in which Sextus argues that any opinions about value must inevitably produce turmoil and destroy tranquility. Perin labels this the "Value Argument," and then does a very strange thing with it: he simply claims that "the value argument is a problem for Sextus" (24), that "Sextus has a good reason to discard the value argument" (13), and then consigns it (at 118) to that "therapeutic strain" of Scepticism that Perin writes out of Sextus altogether.

(I pause to note that Perin’s reaction to the Value Argument strikes me as misplaced in any case. He thinks it makes any future knowledge about values unavoidably disturbing because the Sceptic would “come to know, and hence to believe, either that it is good or that it is bad” (25), and Sextus has said that any such belief is disturbing. But the sense in which belief is entailed by knowledge is not the sense in which ‘belief’ translates ‘*doxa*’; a student of ancient epistemology surely should not write as though $K \Rightarrow B$ entails that *epistêmê* \Rightarrow *doxa*. Sextus in I.27 talks about the person who “opines” (*doxazei*) and “deems” (*nomizetai*) and is disturbed thereby, who pursues “apparent” goods (*dokounta*) and things that are “as he thinks” (*hôs oietai*) good. None of those cognitive conditions is entailed by *epistêmê* in the way that belief is entailed by knowledge. *Juste au contraire*, both Platonists and Stoics often write as though they are incompatible states, with *doxa* being intrinsically insecure. And so, for all the Value Argument says, it may be possible to have *epistêmê* of values and remain undisturbed.)

Perin admits (25) that “the value argument ... requires the Sceptic to disregard his interest in the discovery of truth,” which is a polite way of saying that it calls into question the very idea that Sextus has an “interest in the discovery of truth” that goes beyond its instrumental role. This is Perin’s “good reason” for Sextus to discard it, sc. that it contradicts Perin’s interpretation. And by the end of the chapter, Perin has apparently discarded it for him, because the final page and a half (31–32) speak as though it has been settled that Sextus has an independent interest in the truth, which will then form the basis for the Sceptic’s allegiance to reason, and thus the rational necessity explored in Chapter 2.

The concluding chapter shows the same method. It begins with a round rejection of the views of Striker, Cooper, Annas, Nussbaum, and others, who would portray Sextus as an “anti-rationalist.” But on 115 Perin concedes that the Value Argument is “an expression of a deviant, because clearly anti-rationalist, strand in Scepticism.” And on 118 and following, Perin notes that the Value Argument is only one aspect of a very wide strand of deviance, perhaps a whole bundle of strands of deviance, that run through the *Outlines*, “the therapeutic strain.” As he writes (121), “The therapeutic strain in Scepticism is clearly in tension with those more central features of Scepticism that, I have argued, render Scepticism immune to the charge of anti-rationalism.” Perin’s judgment of the “therapeutic strain,” saved for the final sentence of the book, blends abhorrence and contempt: “... the Sceptic who is a therapist ... is engaged not in the search for truth but in a form of psychotherapy that exhibits a flagrant disregard for the truth.”

Though one might wish to complain about the severity of this judgment, I think it is more important to point out a fundamental tension between the two aims of the Conclusion. On the one hand, it quotes a number of other scholars, collects their view of Sextus under the rubric “anti-rationalist,” and sets out to refute them in the traditional way, by showing that their reading is inconsistent with the text. On the other hand, it also attempts to anathematize parts of the text as repellent and anti-rational, while conceding that they cannot be interpreted in any other way and that Perin intentionally took no account of them in his interpretation.

The rhetorical stance of the Conclusion, then, is misleading: Perin does not show the superiority of his reason-responsive reading over the rival anti-rationalist reading, much less refute the views of Striker, Cooper, and so on. Since he does not engage with the evidence on which they base their readings, he has not even met them, much less refuted them. No one who was previously persuaded by other readings has been given a reason to change their mind. Nor can Perin claim to have done anything to show that Scepticism is “immune to the charge of anti-rationalism,” when all he has done is to exclude the evidence for anti-rationalism from his picture. On these terms, I can “render you immune” to smallpox, cyanide, and atomic bombs—immune, that is, on the condition that you never come into contact with them.

All of this is disappointing, but it should not cause us to lose sight of the book’s real value. It is an intelligent, systematic, and well-integrated attempt to provide an interpretation of an interesting fragment of the views of Sextus Empiricus. Perin’s relentless focus on the rationalist strain, and his explicit inability to accommodate the “therapeutic strain,” offer future scholars a very clear roadmap to the interpretive difficulties to be faced by anyone who wants to provide an interpretation of the *Outlines* as a whole. It should be read by everyone who is interested in Sextus, or in Scepticism.