

SEXTUS EMPIRICUS ON SKEPTICAL PIETY

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With respect to the nature and existence of the gods, Sextus pursues his standard skeptical agenda: assembling equally powerful arguments both for and against, he is left with no inclination to believe either side. Nonetheless, in accordance with ordinary life, custom and law, the skeptic says that the gods exist and that they are provident. He performs all the appropriate religious rites in a reverential and pious spirit—and he does so without holding any beliefs (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* [PH] I 24, III 2; *Adversus Mathematicos* [AM] IX 49).

But why would the skeptic say that the gods exist if he does not believe they exist? And why would he bother to participate in religious ceremonies? One answer immediately suggests itself: the skeptic is insincere in his statements about the gods and in his pious observances. We might suppose he is admitting as much when he says that the skeptic's conformity with the traditional, accepted forms of worship will probably make him *safer* than other philosophers (AM IX 49).

In a forthcoming paper on Sextus' *Against the Physicists*, Richard Bett shows just how puzzling this claim is. As he points out, the skeptic's uncommitted stance is as unorthodox as the dogmatic philosopher's positive theological commitments. But if having unorthodox religious beliefs risks angering the gods or one's fellow citizens, then having no religious beliefs should run the same risk. On the other hand, if the point is that the skeptic is more secure in an epistemic or emotional sense, then it is surprising that Sextus does not say that he will be safer as a result of having suspended judgment, rather than as a result of participating in orthodox religious practice; for the skeptic's tranquility depends, in general, not on his behavior but rather the fact that he has suspended judgment.¹

Fortunately, we need not resolve this puzzle in order to settle the question of the skeptic's sincerity, which is my primary concern here. However we understand the relative safety of the skeptic's religious stance, it

¹ For epistemic uses of "safety" (*asphalês*), see AM VIII 473, 298, 300, 374. This term and its cognates often indicate political security in Epicurus' writings (Obbink 1996, 576).

is a further question whether and to what extent an appreciation of this safety is a motivating factor in his religious practice. If he is publicly pious *in order to be safe*, like the person who heaves himself into church after taking Pascal's wager, then he clearly is disingenuous and insincere.

Penelhum offers a particularly harsh version of this view, describing Sextus' attitude towards the gods as "halfhearted conformism," and Montaigne's Pyrrhonian piety as tepid and confused, the result of mistaking the fideist's reliance on skeptical argument as a means to clear away the obstacles with the positive goal of faith itself. Subsequent fideists, Penelhum (1983, 296–297) claims, saw more clearly "that if skeptic argument is to serve religious ends, it must issue not in belieflessness but in belief . . ." ² And we might add, it should issue in beliefs of the right sort, specifically those that attribute praiseworthy characteristics to the god(s).

The notion that belieflessness is inimical to religious ends serves as the major premise in what I will call the *insincerity objection*.

- 1) Having the relevant beliefs about the gods is a necessary condition for performing genuinely pious actions.
- 2) The skeptic has no beliefs about the gods.
- 3) Therefore the skeptic performs no genuinely pious actions.

The skeptic's insincerity follows directly:

- 4) If one is sincerely religious then he performs genuinely pious actions.
- 5) Hence, by (3) and (4), the skeptic is not sincerely religious.

The initial part of this argument may be seen as an instance of the more general *apraxia* objection.

- 1*) Having the relevant beliefs about x is a necessary condition for performing intentional, skillful, or ethical action with regard to x.
- 2*) The skeptic has no beliefs about x.
- 3*) Therefore, the skeptic performs no intentional, skillful, or ethical action with regard to x.

² Bailey (2002, 193) similarly accuses Sextus of dissimulation in taking part in religious practices without having the appropriate beliefs. Even Barnes, a staunch defender of the 'rustic' interpretation of Pyrrhonism (see note 3 below), finds Sextus' language at *PH* I 24 and III 2, if taken at face value, to be "misleading and perhaps disingenuous" (Barnes 1997, 85–86). And Bett (forthcoming) argues that Sextus does not provide a convincing, or consistent, account of the relation between the skeptic's religious practice and his skeptical arguments about the gods.

Two types of response have been made to the *apraxia* objection on behalf of the skeptic: we may either reject the second premise by arguing that the skeptic withholds judgment only on philosophical or theoretical matters, but has all sorts of ordinary beliefs, or we may reject the first premise by arguing that belief is not a necessary condition for the relevant sort of action.³

In a forthcoming paper, Julia Annas presents a powerful rejection of the second premise. Her argument rests on a distinction between religious and theological beliefs in ancient Greek polytheism. Theological belief attributes some property to the gods that is supposed to reveal the truth regarding unclear objects of investigation, it is supposed to be universally true, and based on rational considerations. Religious belief, by contrast, is none of these. It is not the product of any sort of investigation, but rather arises by virtue of membership and participation in a community with well-established religious practices. In the case of polytheistic Greek religion, such beliefs are not held to be universally true. Consequently, ordinary Greek polytheists do not see their religious beliefs as conflicting with other, apparently incompatible beliefs.

It is striking how open Greek polytheists were to incorporating foreign gods into their own religious worldviews, and how little concern they had for proselytizing or converting those with different religious beliefs. Annas accounts for this by claiming that Greek polytheistic religion was seen as “inter-comprehensible in a non-exclusive way.” In other words, competing and even apparently incompatible religious beliefs and practices could be translated in such a way as to make perfectly good sense of them without thereby offering some universal, cross-cultural account of the divine.⁴

³ For details on the long-standing dispute over what sorts of belief the skeptic suspends judgment on, see Thorsrud (2009, 173–182), Burnyeat and Frede (1997). Even though the issue of skeptical piety only deals with a small subset of the sort of beliefs a Pyrrhonist might have, a successful rejection of premise (2) would settle the larger issue about the scope of Pyrrhonism in favor of urbanity. It would be implausible to maintain that the only sort of ordinary belief a skeptic might have is about the gods. If ordinary religious belief is compatible with Pyrrhonian *epochê*, it is hard to see why ordinary ethical, political, or historical belief wouldn't be. On the other hand, a successful rejection of premise (1), which I undertake here, leaves open the issue of scope. Even if the skeptic lacks ordinary religious beliefs, he might still have other sorts of ordinary belief.

⁴ Annas points out, in contrast, that their credal nature and reliance on sacred texts makes the three Western forms of monotheism essentially theological. Acceptance of one creed or the authority of one sacred text necessarily involves the rejection of

So one might have local religious beliefs without having, or even being logically committed to, any theological beliefs. If Sextus' arguments in *AM IX* and *PH III* target only the latter, then he aims to induce suspension of judgment only regarding reasoned accounts of cross-cultural, universal conceptions of the divine. Such a project allows the skeptic to hold ordinary Greek religious beliefs and to be pious in the way ordinary people are.

I will argue, however, that ordinary Greek religious belief does have theological implications, regardless of whether they are acknowledged, and regardless of whether religious belief is itself based on reason. By examining the content of such beliefs, as described both by Sextus and some roughly contemporaneous Greek writers, we may see that they qualify as the sort of dogma Sextus' skeptical practice is designed to eliminate. Having argued that we cannot plausibly reject premise (2), I then attempt to defend skeptical piety by rejecting premise (1)—the necessity of belief for piety. I claim that the skeptic can perform genuinely pious actions in accordance with religious impressions, or affective states, that fall short of belief.

1. *The Skeptic Has neither Ordinary
nor Philosophical, Religious Convictions*

Sextus opens his discussion of physics in *PH III* by considering god as an active cause. He notes that it is against the rashness of the Dogmatists that he will present his case (*PH III 2*). Given the interminable debates about the nature of the divine, Sextus claims it is necessary to suspend judgment about whether the gods exist, so far as the Dogmatists are concerned (*PH III 6*). But we should not suppose that ordinary religious beliefs are henceforth off the table.

Throughout *PH III*, Sextus is primarily interested in undermining the rational force of philosophical views on the central topics of the physics of his day: e.g., causation, matter, motion, change, and time. Revealing the failures of the physicists' best attempts to make sense of body, for example, he nudges us towards the conclusion that body is

other, incompatible creeds or sacred authorities—but see Sihvola (2006), esp. 97–98. Consequently, a Pyrrhonian skeptic who claimed to be one of these sorts of monotheists would necessarily be insincere.

unreal. But to counterbalance this impression, Sextus appeals to the everyday observation that bodies appear to be real (*PH* III 49). Ordinary life is not offered as a more plausible alternative, or as a correction, but rather as a counterweight to the surprising impression we are left with from the refutation of the Dogmatists. Similarly, in his discussion of motion, Sextus remarks that “so far as appearance [and ordinary life, *ho bios*] goes there seems to be motion, so far as [Parmenides’ and Melissus’] philosophical argument goes it is unreal” (*PH* III 65). In these examples, Sextus leads us to feel that there no more is than is not such a thing as body or motion. He does not encourage us to reject abstruse theorizing in favor of ordinary observation and belief.

This willingness to lump ordinary people together with philosophers is also evident when Sextus presents a familiar dilemma for anyone (presumably anyone other than the skeptic) who says that the gods exist and are provident (*PH* III 9). Either the gods provide for all or only for some. It is not in keeping with the conception of the gods as powerful and benevolent that they should provide only for some. But the existence of evil strongly suggests that they do not provide for all. So, either the gods are willing but unable to provide for all, or they are able but not willing. In the first case, the gods are unacceptably weak and in the second they are unacceptably malicious. Therefore, Sextus concludes,

those who firmly state there are gods are no doubt bound to be impious: if they say that the gods provide for everything, they will say that they are a cause of evil; and if they say that they provide for some or even for none at all, they will be bound to say either that the gods are malign or that they are weak—and anyone who says this is clearly impious.⁵ (*PH* III 12)

Sextus is being intentionally provocative by claiming that a firm belief in the existence of the gods leads to impiety. The point is that one who believes in divine providence cannot consistently maintain his conception of the gods. Lacking a conclusive resolution of the problem of evil, he may be driven to accept one of two beliefs, the implications of which, he himself would consider impious. Short of that, he may simply end up with some false, or at least unjustified, belief about the gods which itself might be impious.

⁵ All translations of *PH* are from Annas and Barnes (2000).

Of course there are plenty of proposed resolutions. The Stoics argue that the gods provide for everything, but are never the cause of any evil—we humans are to blame for that. But there are powerful objections to this response. For example, we may call into question the coherence of the relevant sense of human freedom, and its relation to divine power. The Stoic will then have to disarm the objections, generate new arguments, or finally acknowledge that the reasons for and against are equally strong. And so it goes: philosophers develop increasingly sophisticated versions of traditional theodicies, which are then subjected to increasingly sophisticated objections.

The Epicureans, on the other hand, have no need of theodicy since they argue that the gods' indifference towards us is a sign neither of malice nor weakness. Discovering that this is so is instrumental in promoting Epicurean tranquility. It relieves us of any anxiety about divine wrath while also articulating an ideal we should all aim at.⁶ From the skeptical standpoint, however, such therapy can be at best temporarily effective. The Dogmatists' competing conceptions of the divine, along with direct skeptical challenges, should eventually undermine Epicurean conviction.⁷

Such persistent disputes are disturbing, especially if one is convinced that his wellbeing depends on resolving them (see *PH* I 12, 26). If my happiness, along with the security of my family or larger political community, depends on having true beliefs about the gods and providence, what should I believe? The stakes are even higher if we also suppose that having false beliefs about the gods is itself impious.

But perhaps these disturbances arise only for the philosophically minded who are moved to respond to the skeptic's challenge. We can easily imagine an ordinary person whose religious convictions are never challenged, and is not even aware that there *are* philosophical disputes regarding the gods. More interestingly, we may imagine a person who is relatively immune to such challenges. If his religious beliefs are so foundational as to serve as the cognitive 'lens' through which he sees the world, he may not even feel the need to provide rational evidence in

⁶ For an excellent brief account of Epicurean theology, see O'Keefe (2010), 155–162.

⁷ Even if all of the dogmatists agree that the gods are imperishable and blessed (whatever that might mean) there is no consensus as to whether the gods are corporeal or incorporeal, anthropomorphic or not, located in space and in the universe or not (*PH* III 3–4).

support. Indeed, it would seem odd to seek proof of what is so strikingly evident. Lacking rational grounds for his religious beliefs, this person will find skeptical challenges irrelevant.⁸

But even if he is unwilling or unable to consider the possibility that the gods do not exist or that they are not provident, he will inevitably have to confront the appearance of innocent suffering and injustice. The fact that one perceives the world as an ultimately just place will not eliminate the very appearance of injustice, even if it provides an easy re-evaluation of such appearances. Furthermore, since prayer, sacrifice and ritual cleansing do not always produce the desired results, theists who hold that the gods are provident face a recurrent challenge: they must either reaffirm their trust in the efficacy of religious observance despite its failures or give up those convictions.⁹ None of this requires skeptical intervention. Ordinary experience of the world is sufficient. In fact Sextus mentions such a case:

Diagoras of Melos, the dithyrambic poet, was at first, they say, god-fearing (*deisidaimôn*) above all others ... but when he had been wronged by a man who had sworn falsely and suffered no punishment for it, he changed round and asserted that god does not exist. (AM IX 53)

Diagoras experienced what Sextus refers to as an anomaly: he could not believe both that god is provident and powerful and that the injustice he suffered would go unpunished. Unlike the skeptic, Diagoras resolves the anomaly by accepting one belief and rejecting the other.

⁸ Wolterstorff, Plantinga and others have developed versions of Reformed Epistemology according to which religious experience grounds belief insofar as it is the cause of that belief—see, for example, Plantinga and Wolterstorff (1983). As long as the believer has some plausible, though not necessarily conclusive, response to known objections, his religious belief is not contrary to reason, though it is not justified on the basis of reasons. I take some inspiration from Reformed Epistemology in the next section when I argue that the skeptic's piety is sincere insofar as it arises from religious experience—the crucial difference is that the skeptic's religious experience does not cause him to have any beliefs. Knuuttilla and Sihvola (2000, 139) find an important similarity between Sextus' view and Wittgensteinian fideism: religion is autonomous insofar as it "needs no justification from outside, and cannot be justified by the means of dogmatic philosophy." However, as they convincingly point out that unlike the Wittgensteinian the skeptic is not aiming to preserve the justificatory practices of autonomous forms of discourse.

⁹ The Reformed Epistemologist might at this point claim that despite any number of failed predictions about divine intervention, there are reasons why God fails to act when we expect that He will, or should. Be that as it may, if this is the direction the ordinary religious believer takes, it is a decisive step towards theology and away from a merely uncritical acceptance of norms. See also Sihvola (2006).

What makes the anomaly about divine justice possible, if not inevitable in this case, is the fact that ordinary religious belief (in marked distinction from the Epicurean view) is supposed to be the basis for true explanations and predictions regarding divine intervention in the natural, causal order of things. Whether or not it is supported by rational considerations, ordinary religious beliefs refer to an objective, shared reality in which the gods are able to intervene and make a difference in the way things go.

To illustrate this point, I offer a few historical examples from Greek authors roughly contemporaneous with Sextus.

Inscribed on pillars inside a temple of Asklepios in Corinth were the names of people healed by the god, along with descriptions of the diseases and how they were healed (Paus. II 27.3, Jones 1936). The suppliants slept in the temple and were often informed by the god in their dreams of the necessary curative measures. For relatively minor ailments, the god's advice was little more than commonsense—e.g. restricted diet, fresh air, exercise, and bathing. But there are also miraculous cures recorded (Walton 1979, 59–60). The credulous Pausanias reports that Asklepios restored the sight to a blind man by presenting a sealed tablet to a woman with orders to deliver it to him. Opening the tablet, he was suddenly able to see, and gratefully obeying what the god had written, he gave the woman two thousand gold staters for the founding of a temple to Asklepios (Paus. X 38.13). Such stories along with the inscriptions at Corinth testify to an uncritical acceptance of the healing events as confirmation of the god's power.

Pausanias has no interest in appealing to placebo effects, or more generally, in providing a naturalistic account of these events. And he has no truck with metaphorical interpretations of divine agency. He reports, for example, that a man suddenly died after encountering the goddess Isis, thereby confirming Homer's (*Il.* 20.131) remark that "it is ill for mankind to see the gods in bodily shape" (Paus. X 32.13–18). Even more striking is his conviction that in the "good old days" men of excellent character were sometimes transformed into gods, but because of the wickedness of those alive today this no longer happens (Paus. VIII 2.3–7).

An even greater credulity is apparent in the hypochondriac ravings of Aelius Aristides, who, in his *Sacred Tales* charts the history of his malaise and various stages of cure at the divine hand of Asklepios.¹⁰

¹⁰ See Behr's (1968) commentary for a more sympathetic treatment.

Aristides' unquestioning faith in the benevolent power of Asklepios is nicely summed up in this passage:

Whenever the God prescribed and clearly stated them [cures], the same regimen and the same actions brought to my body and to my spirit salvation, strength, comfort, ease, high spirits, and every good thing. But when some other person advised me and missed the intention of the God, they brought everything opposite to this. How is this not the greatest sign of the God's power?
(*Sacred Tales* II.73, Behr 1968, 238)

How indeed? The same reasoning can be used to justify any other sort of occult power: the mentalist's failure to read our minds is always the result of some interference, and never the result of impotence. There is no possible evidence that could convince Aristides that Asklepios is unreliable, malicious, or non-existent, and yet like Pausanias, he is convinced the god is an effective causal agent acting in the world.¹¹

On the other hand, just as some ordinary believers wholeheartedly accepted the reality of Asklepios' power, some practitioners of Hippocratic medicine considered the priests of Asklepios to be quacks (Zaidman & Patel 1992, 131). And Lucian devotes an entire work to debunking the scandalous frauds of Alexander, the false prophet of Asklepios.

The most entertaining of Alexander's scams is his introduction of the god, reborn in the form of a serpent, an essential Asklepian symbol. One night he concealed a newborn snake inside a goose egg that had been blown out and placed it near the foundation of a temple that had been recently excavated. The next morning he ran through the market place in a religious frenzy, singing his praises of Asklepios and Apollo at the top of his lungs. He attracted a great crowd to witness his "discovery" of the egg and the revelation of "the god." Several days later, he affixed to a full-grown snake a linen head that looked very human and began to show the "god" to the awe struck public, who were eager to pay the steep price for the snake-god's oracles (*Alexander the False Prophet* 13–27).

¹¹ Ptolemy offers a similar defense of astrological prediction in his *Tetrabiblos*: every failure can readily be explained in terms of intervening causal factors. So, for example, we may explain why two people born at the same time and place, with the same astrological charts, live different lives, by appealing to some causal factors other than the relative positions of the stars and planets. Astrological predictions always come true ... except when they don't. See Long (1982).

As he wished to astonish the crowd still more, he promised to produce the god talking—delivering oracles in person without a prophet. It was no difficult matter for him to fasten cranes' windpipes together and pass them through the head, which he had so fashioned as to be lifelike. Then he answered the questions through someone else who spoke into the tube from the outside, so that the voice issued from his canvas Asklepios.

(*Alexander* 26, Harmon 1925)

Alexander also had a method for correcting his, or rather the god's, erroneous predictions. He achieved infallibility by simply expunging the mistaken oracles after the fact and revising them appropriately (*Alexander* 27).

Asklepios is undoubtedly a central figure in Greek religion. He appears to have deep roots as an earth spirit in the prehistory of the Greek cults. Homer mentions him on several occasions, as do Hesiod and Pindar. Although these poets do not consider him a god, his divine status is widely acknowledged by the second century AD.¹² The antiquity of Asklepios along with the complex, interrelated development, transplants and appropriations of local Greek religions, goes some way in explaining the rich variety of sanctuaries and rituals devoted to the god by the second century AD (see Paus. II 26–29). This diversity, however, does not in the least detract from the point I have been emphasizing: both affirmations and denials of ordinary religious belief include reference to the gods as effective causal agents, and this fact renders such belief dogmatic by Sextus' standards.

Causal efficacy cuts across differences of culture and language, at least as far as the skeptic is concerned. For in order for even relativized beliefs about piety to be true, we must suppose that the gods who are honored by such observances really exist. So even if we are inclined to think that religious observances should only be assessed relative to conventional norms—that human sacrifice is really pious for the Tauri, but not for us¹³—we should not find it plausible to maintain that for some people

¹² Walton (1979, 30) notes that, "The tendency of the Athenian cult was to localize Asklepios, while the very opposite course was followed in other parts of Greece. Here he was associated with heroes rather than with the higher gods, while in Epidauros and elsewhere he is worshipped with Zeus, Apollo, Artemis and so on."

¹³ It may well have been the case that Sextus' predecessor, Aenesidemus, aimed his skeptical attack exclusively at claims about the invariable nature of things, but was not concerned with properly relativized beliefs (see Woodruff 1988, opposed by Schofield 2007). Whether or not we accept the view that Bett (1997) attributes to Sextus in *AM*

only one god exists, for others many gods exist, and for still others no gods exist. Sextus points to this very anomaly: “among ordinary people, some say that there is one god, others that there are many and of different forms” (*PH* III 219). But they cannot both be right: if there are many gods, there is not only one. Even if there is some convincing resolution of the dispute between monotheists and polytheists, say in some form of henotheism, the dispute between theists and atheists remains. And even more to the point, Asklepios might very well ignore your pleas, but if he exists for me in the ordinary sense of the term, he clearly exists for you as well. Since we should be reluctant to import any philosophical or ethereal sense of existence to ordinary religious belief, it seems we must accept this important limitation on relativizing strategies. So: ordinary religious beliefs presuppose the causal efficacy of the god(s), and causal efficacy presupposes the existence of the god(s); while normative claims regarding what is pious or morally good can be plausibly relativized, existential claims cannot, at least as they are ordinarily understood.

What’s more, Sextus is well aware that the existence of the gods is the fundamental issue. He opposes the views of both ordinary and philosophical theists to the views of atheists (*AM* IX 50–51). Having developed equally powerful considerations on both sides, the skeptic declares that the gods are no more existent than non-existent (*AM* IX 59). Here again, ordinary beliefs are included in the philosophical dispute and not offered as a suitable alternative or corrective to misguided dogmatism.¹⁴ The skeptic’s assertion that the gods are no more existent than non-existent is clearly incompatible with ordinary religious belief. And it appears to require the skeptic to suspend judgment on the causal efficacy of the gods as well as the very existence of piety (cf. *AM* IX 123–125), even relativized to a particular time and place.

XI, namely the negatively dogmatic claim that nothing *is* by nature good or bad, Sextus’ arguments against the ethicists in *PH* clearly aim at suspension of judgment regarding such claims. The question that is relevant for our concerns is whether Sextus’ aim in *PH* is exclusively the elimination of beliefs about the invariable nature of the gods, or whether it includes the elimination of relativized and ordinary beliefs about the gods as well.

¹⁴ See also Sextus’ description of the first of Agrippa’s five modes: “undecidable dissension occurs both in ordinary life and among philosophers” (*PH* I 165). Insofar as ordinary beliefs figure into apparently interminable disputes, the skeptic will suspend judgment regarding them.

There is further, and I think decisive, evidence that Sextus targets ordinary religious belief for elimination in his concluding remarks about the gods in *AM IX*.

As a result of these [arguments], the skeptic's suspension of judgment is introduced, especially since they are supplemented by the divergence of the views of ordinary folk about the gods. For different people have different and discordant notions about them, so that neither are all of these notions to be trusted because of their inconsistency, nor some of them because of their equipollence; and this is further confirmed by the mythologizing of the theologians and the poets; for it is full of all kinds of impiety.

(*AM IX* 191–192)

The variety of incompatible religious beliefs, whether ordinary, poetic, or philosophical, is grist to the skeptic's mill because they all claim to reveal the truth of matters that are not evidently so to everyone. Insofar as they conflict with one another they cannot all be true; but neither is any one of them more convincing than the others (see *AM IX* 29). The kind of dispute that would have taken place between Lucian and Aristides, had they met, is not unusual; nor is it likely to have escaped the skeptic's notice. Such a difference of opinion appears to be an excellent instance of "the divergence of the views of ordinary folk about the gods."¹⁵

A puzzling aspect of this concluding remark is the further confirmation offered by the allegedly impious pronouncements of the poets. Apparently the impiety of the poets is offered as a reason for not accepting their portrayal of the gods as engaged in lascivious and immoral acts. But we should not take that as an endorsement of the opposed belief. A Platonist, for example, would firmly assert that the gods are incapable of immoral behavior, and consequently that the poets are guilty of ignorance, if not slander. But Sextus' customary reverence of the gods is based on no dogma, Platonic or otherwise. Making firm assertions about the nature of the gods presupposes some sort of standard or criterion that exceeds what is necessary for ordinary life in all of its behavioral expressions, political, moral, religious, etc. So perhaps the poets' impiety is really more a matter of how they say things about the gods rather than

¹⁵ The skeptic would side with Lucian's rational debunking of religious fraud only insofar as it undermines conviction, but not to the extent of replacing, reforming or improving such popular convictions. At *AM VI* 19, for example, Sextus promotes the Epicurean view that "a clap of thunder . . . does not betoken the epiphany of a god, though supposed to do so by ignorant and superstitious folk." But he does not endorse the positive Epicurean view that the gods are blissfully indifferent to us mortal humans.

what they say. Firm assertions lead us all, whether Platonist, tragic poet, or ordinary person, to untenable positions regarding the gods. The skeptic steers clear of all such assertions and the convictions underlying them.

2. *Piety without Belief*

Having shown that it is not plausible to reject premise (2) of the insincerity objection, I turn to the case for rejecting premise (1). A strong intuition motivating this premise is that a non-believing religious practitioner must be either intentionally or unintentionally deceptive in his religious practice. Intentional deception is relatively easy to dismiss. Suppose that one has carefully considered the arguments for and against the morality of eating meat and as a result has suspended judgment. Since he neither believes that it is morally acceptable nor that it is morally unacceptable, it would make no sense to accuse him of hypocrisy for eating meat. Such a charge could stick only if, contrary to our assumption, he had arrived at the conclusion that eating meat is immoral.

A paradigm case of intentional deception arises when one publicly condemns carnivores, firmly asserting that they are immoral, and then secretly gorges on hamburgers without the remorse that characterizes weakness of will. Being disingenuous necessarily involves the intention to deceive others with respect to one's beliefs or actions. Similarly, the atheist who takes part in religious rituals unavoidably gives others a false view of himself.¹⁶ In the best-case scenario, we may suppose that he wishes to deceive intolerant religious believers in order to avoid persecution. But even if such deception is justified, his religious observances are still insincere.¹⁷

The reverent skeptic, by contrast, is not trying to convince his fellow-worshippers that he believes as they do. If in fact he has no beliefs about the gods, he has no beliefs that can be contradicted by his actions, and he has nothing to hide; so he can have no intent to deceive.¹⁸ The crucial

¹⁶ A different sort of atheist might adopt a reverential attitude towards godless nature, and sincerely express this reverence, but he would not thereby be acting as if god exists.

¹⁷ For a similar accusation leveled against Epicureans taking part in traditional religious rituals, see Plutarch, *Contra Epic. Beat.* 1102B.

¹⁸ The character Chauncey Gardiner, from Kosinski's *Being There*, is an excellent illustration of this.

point is that the skeptic is not pretending to *be* an ordinary religious believer by virtue of engaging in the customary forms of worship. When Sextus says the skeptic follows, or acts in accordance with, ordinary life, we need not take him to mean that the skeptic differs in no significant ways from the ordinary person when engaging in these activities.

Still, we might think there is a reasonable presumption that those engaging in shared religious practices also share the relevant beliefs. This is merely to reaffirm premise (1) of the insincerity objection—belief is a necessary condition for performing pious action. If so, the pious skeptic is merely going through the motions and is at best unintentionally deceptive. He may not mean to mislead his fellow worshippers, but this will be the outcome. Furthermore, since it is hard to imagine that he would not realize this, he would be at least partially responsible for their mistake. If the skeptic is aware that those around him will assume he believes as they do, and that they would consider his participation insincere unless accompanied by those beliefs, the skeptic's religious behavior is objectionable, as is his willingness to *say* that providential gods exist.

On the other hand, we must be cautious about projecting our contemporary views regarding piety. It is widely acknowledged, as Betegh puts it, that

Eusebia, commendable religious attitude, consisted not in fidelity to a code of belief but in the correct performance of ritual obligations and regularly honoring the gods with generous, though not excessive, offerings.¹⁹
(Betegh 2006, 627)

It was this lack of dogmatic constraint on religious practice that opened the door to philosophical innovation. Platonists, Aristotelians, Epicureans and Stoics could all act in accordance with local religious tradition while offering their innovations,

not as a rupture with traditional religiosity or a devastating attack from the outside, but as internal reforms grounded on a genuine understanding of the nature of the divine. (Betegh 2006, 626; cf. Mansfeld 1999, 478)

¹⁹ However, we should also be cautious not to reduce Greek piety entirely to enthusiastic participation in ritual. According to Zaidman and Patel (1992, 14–15), to be pious was “to believe in the efficacy of the symbolic system that the city had established for the purpose of managing relations between gods and men, and to participate in it, moreover, in the most vigorously active manner possible.”

The skeptic's piety may similarly be seen as compatible with, or even more strongly, in accordance with, traditional religious practice. The crucial difference is that the skeptic is not proposing any sort of internal reform. Indeed, the skeptic is not proposing anything at all. The implicit challenge of skeptical religious practice is the notion that we need no convictions about the gods, let alone more rationally justifiable convictions, in order to sincerely worship them.

What accounts for the lingering sense that the skeptic's pious observations are insincere is the assumption that he lacks the internal affective states associated with religious practice. This, in turn, rests on the assumption that one cannot have the proper affective states if one lacks the relevant beliefs. To reject this I will argue that the skeptic may experience the sort of affective states necessary for sincerely pious action in the absence of belief.

Although Sextus says surprisingly little about his own time and place, he occasionally refers to what is customary "for us." In some of these cases we find an action or custom is both impious and illegal: among most of us it is unlawful to defile the altar of a god with human blood ... [and] we think that holy places are polluted by the killing of a human being" (*PH* III 208; see III 221, I 149). Furthermore, "some people actually eat human flesh as a matter of indifference, something which among us has been deemed unholy" (III 225) and unlawful (III 207).

There is no good reason to suppose that Sextus excludes himself when he says "we think" and "it has been deemed by us." Guiding his actions in accordance with customs and laws is a matter of acting in accordance with how things appear as well as conforming to what is customarily done. By the same token, the skeptic does not eat and drink simply because he sees others eating and drinking, but also because he is hungry and thirsty, and eating and drinking seem good. The mere fact that he eats and drinks is explained by the second of the four-fold observances, necessitation by feelings. But *what* the skeptic eats and drinks, or refuses to eat and drink, is explained by what he finds pleasant along with the third observance, guidance by law and custom.

It is of course possible that what seems good to the skeptic is contrary to the customs and laws.²⁰ It might seem to him, for example, that the

²⁰ If there are laws and customs that generate anxiety and mental disturbance, it is at least possible that the skeptic's drive towards tranquility would make it appear to him that

gods demand human sacrifice. But such an impression would have to come from somewhere. If human sacrifice is deemed impious by the established religious traditions, the contrary impression would have to have a foreign origin. Insofar as the skeptic's evaluative impressions are the product of habituation or enculturation, they will not be contrary to the established traditions of his community. So we may suppose that, for the most part, when the skeptic abides by his city's laws and customs, it is because it seems good to do so. There may certainly be cases in which something seems good that is contrary to what the laws and customs demand—but this will be the exception and not the rule.

Accordingly, we may suppose that spilling human blood at sacred places and eating human flesh seem bad to Sextus. Likewise, the reason the skeptic says that the gods are provident is that they seem to be provident. He will revere the gods as good and unaffected by evil not simply because he sees others doing so, but also because it seems to him that the gods are to be revered as good and unaffected by evil. It may even appear to him that by engaging in religious practices he is doing his part to preserve the proper relation between gods and men—a recurrent theme in ancient Greek religion.

In order to further explore this, we will consider two of the skeptic's religious 'impressions': the appearance that it is impious to eat human flesh, and the appearance that the gods are provident. In one respect these are no different from other evaluative impressions, e.g. tattooing babies appears shameful, and piracy appears unjust (*PH* III 202, 214, respectively). Being habituated to his community's norms, the skeptic will immediately reject such things. He doesn't need to reflect on any rational considerations that are supposed to establish the injustice of piracy or the impiety of cannibalism—he will simply see it that way. (In this respect, the skeptic's religious impressions are similar to the properly basic beliefs of Reformed Epistemology.)

But whereas the theist feels no need to support what he takes to be more evidently true by what is less evidently true, the skeptic feels no need to support what he does not take to be true in the first place. More precisely, the skeptic does not take his impressions, whether perceptual or evaluative, to reveal the way the world is.

living in accordance with such laws and customs is bad. It is perhaps not coincidental that the gods appear provident to Sextus and not malicious (see *PH* I 29–30).

When we investigate whether existing things are such as they appear, we grant that they appear [for no one disputes whether things appear as they do, but whether they are as they appear, *PH* I 22], and what we investigate is not what is apparent but what is said about what is apparent—and this is different from investigating what is apparent itself.

(*PH* I 19–20; see *PH* II 10, I 13, 193)

This is clearest in the perceptual case: honey appears (i.e. tastes) sweet. Such impressions are not objects of investigation—Sextus thinks no one would seriously question whether honey *seems* sweet when it does. The skeptic merely acknowledges his awareness of the sensation, revealing only how he takes himself to be affected at that moment. Understood this way, such impressions cannot be opposed to one another. If honey appears sweet to him in the evening and bitter in the morning, then he will admit that it appears now sweet and now bitter. He will feel no need to choose one impression over the other as he does not take these shifting impressions to make competing claims about reality.

So too the skeptic's impression that cannibalism is impious is merely a report of how he is passively affected by the thought of cannibalism. He does not take the impression to be true or even convincing. But he will acquiesce in the feeling of revulsion and act accordingly. As in the case of honey, the skeptic will not question whether cannibalism appears impious, but whether in fact it is. He will consider Chrysippus' arguments that there are occasions when eating human flesh, even one's own, is the right thing to do (*AM* XI 192–194, *PH* III 247). And he will oppose this view with arguments establishing the impiety of cannibalism. But even after suspending judgment on this issue it may continue to appear that cannibalism is impious, even though the appearance will move the skeptic less violently than one who believes it is impious by nature (cf. *PH* I 29–30, III 235–236).

To the extent that the appearance of impiety is not contingent on rational considerations, the investigation of arguments *pro* and *con* should have no effect (unless the skeptic is uncharacteristically unable to achieve the standstill of reason by providing equally strong arguments on each side of the issue).²¹ In this way the skeptic may consistently feel no

²¹ Elsewhere I argue for a dispositional interpretation of such passages as *PH* I 34 in which Sextus discusses what the skeptic will do when he is not able, at the moment, to provide an equally strong counterargument to the one proposed (Thorsrud 2009, 132–134, 187–188). On this view, the current imbalance does not incline the skeptic to

rational inclination to affirm either the piety or impiety of cannibalism while experiencing revulsion at the thought of it. Even though he no longer has a disposition to affirm or deny any proposition that supposedly reveals the truth about the gods, his disposition to feel attraction or repulsion to some proposed course of action remains. The affective state of revulsion at the thought of eating human flesh is not dependent on any particular beliefs about the gods, though perhaps some such beliefs were initially necessary in the process of habituation.

The situation is similar to the skeptic's attitude towards motion: he will not question whether things appear to move, but whether as a matter of fact, in reality, they do (*PH* III 63–81, *AM* X 37–168). As we have seen, Sextus appeals to the commonsensical view of the ordinary person that motion is real: “so far as the appearances go there seems to be motion” (*PH* III 65, *AM* X 45). But as far as philosophical argument goes, motion is unreal. Objects probably appear to move in much the same way to ordinary people as they do to skeptics, and for that matter as they do to philosophers, whether or not they deny the reality of motion. The crucial difference is the additional significance the impression is supposed to have. The ordinary person (sometimes) takes the appearance of motion as a reason to believe in the reality of motion, and some philosophers take it as an illusion to be explained away. The skeptic, by contrast, does not take the impression of motion as evidence of anything. Like everyone else, he will act in accordance with how things seem—he will move out of the way of speeding chariots and reach out his hand to catch something thrown to him. But none of these ordinary reactions require him to take the appearance of motion as signifying anything. Suspending judgment regarding the reality of motion does not interfere with the appearance that things move, nor does it impede the skeptic's ability to act accordingly.

Analogous claims can be made for the impression that the gods are provident.²² Divine providence probably appears much the same to ordi-

assent, even modestly, since he has a stronger inclination to suspend judgment based on his past skeptical practice, which has always enabled him to discover the necessary counterargument in the end.

²² Bett (forthcoming) briefly raises and rejects this interpretation for two reasons: first it would make Sextus' claim to follow ordinary life in religious matters disingenuous, since ordinary people have definite beliefs about the gods. But I have argued above that we should not take Sextus to mean that the skeptic *is* an ordinary religious believer, i.e. that he differs in no significant way. Second, Bett claims that Sextus generally avoids making any remarks about how matters contested by dogmatists even appear to him—for example,

nary religious believers as it does to the reverent skeptic. In the right circumstances, this impression will induce the relevant affective states of admiration, fear, reverence, wonder, etc. And it will trigger the inclination to give the gods their due by engaging in the appropriate rituals. The difference is again the additional significance that is sometimes attached to the impression of divine providence. Unlike both the ordinary religious believer and the philosophical theist, the skeptic will feel no inclination to reason either to or from this impression. I.e. he will neither take it as a premise, or any sort of evidence, from which to draw a conclusion, nor as something to be accounted for or explained by rational means.

It may be the case that the gods appear to the skeptic at one time provident and at another time malicious. But again that would pose no particular problem since he does not experience these impressions in competition with one another. Having no such contradictions to resolve is in fact an essential component of the skeptic's tranquility. For the ordinary religious believer, by contrast, there is an ever-present possibility of confronting the troubling contradiction between the impression that the gods are powerful and provident, and the impression that injustice exists.

The skeptic's indifference to whether his impressions cohere may seem scandalous or at least epistemically irresponsible. But the Pyrrhonist does not accept the obligation that philosophers typically take for granted, namely, to arrive at a more coherent, and hence more rationally defensible view of reality. On the other hand, if firm assertion and dogmatic belief about the gods interfere with, or detract from, one's reverent affective states, i.e. if firm belief about the gods leads us unwittingly to impiety, then contrary to Penelhum's assessment, skeptical argument could indeed serve religious ends. By eliminating both ordinary and

he does not say there is (i.e. appears to be) a criterion of truth or there are (i.e. appear to be) causes; rather, he avoids saying anything. So if we take Sextus' assertions about the gods as I have, as remarks about how things appear to the skeptic, it would be a striking departure from his normal pattern. I disagree about the pattern. Having the appropriate impressions about the gods is as essential to communal life for ancient Greeks as having the appropriate impression about what is morally good and bad. Just as these impressions enable one to navigate through the social world, impressions about motion enable one to navigate through the physical world. People are habituated, by their interactions with the social and physical worlds to see things these ways—the resulting impressions are thus not founded on reasons, and may remain untouched by the skeptical practice of balancing opposed arguments. By contrast, having impressions about criteria of truth or causes (*qua* causes, i.e. in the philosophical sense of the term), is utterly unnecessary for the practical purposes of day-to-day life.

philosophical religious belief, the skeptic may be seen as clearing the impediments to genuinely reverent affective states, rather than clearing the way for their dogmatic attendants.

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