

SEXTUS EMPIRICUS ON THE SIREN SONG OF REASON AND THE SKEPTICAL DEFENSE OF ORDINARY LIFE*

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ABSTRACT: By understanding the sense in which Sextus thinks reason is deceptive we may clarify his attitude towards ordinary life. The deception, like that of the Siren's song, is practical rather than epistemic. It is not a matter of leading us to assent to false or unjustified conclusions but is rather a distraction from, or even corruption of, ordinary life.

KEYWORDS: Pyrrhonian skepticism, inquiry, dialectic, deception

Sextus opens his case against the grammarians by comparing them to the Sirens. Knowing that humanity is inquisitive by nature and has a deep-seated desire for truth, the Sirens promise to teach *ta onta* by means of their wondrous songs.¹ And just as these songs captivate those who hear them, the grammarians inspire in their students a great longing for the knowledge and skill they teach (*M*1.43). Sextus even adopts the grammarian's *modus operandi*, illustrating his comparison with Homer's account.²

* I would like to thank Richard Bett for inviting me to present an earlier version of this paper at a session of the 2018 Central APA Conference devoted to Sextus' relatively lesser-studied *Adversus Mathematicos* [*M*] 1-6, which he has recently translated as *Sextus Empiricus: Against Those in the Disciplines* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). I would like also to thank Scott Aikin and Gina White for organizing the 2018 Ancient Epistemology Conference at Vanderbilt University, where I had another opportunity to develop and discuss the argument presented here.

¹ *eiduiai hoti phusei philomathês estin anthrôpos kai polus autô kata sternôn tês alêtheias himeros entetêken* (*M*1.42).

² Sluiter perceptively observes that Sextus' attack on grammar and poetry proceeds in much the same way as his attack on dogmatic philosophy by employing the very methods he intends to undermine. In the case of grammar, this allows him to turn the literary and rhetorical power of his opponents against themselves: Ineke Sluiter, "The Rhetoric of Scepticism: Sextus against the Language Specialists," in *Ancient Scepticism and the Sceptical Tradition*, ed. Juha Sihvola (*Acta Philosophica Fennica* 66, 2000): 98-99.

Come this way, honored Odysseus, great glory of the Achaians, and stay your ship, so that you can listen here to our singing; for no one else has ever sailed past this place in his black ship until he has listened to the honey-sweet voice that issues from our lips; then goes on, well pleased, knowing more than ever he did; for we know everything that the Argives and Trojans did and suffered in wide Troy through the gods' despite. Over all the generous earth we know everything that happens. (*M* 1.42, *Od.* 12.184-90)³

Sextus does not, and of course need not, point out that the Sirens' promise is deceptive. His readers would certainly recall Circe's warning: those who hear the Sirens' song never return home, but end up as piles of bone and rotted corpse (*Od.* 12.39-46).

Sextus' comparison of the disciplines, or at least of *grammatiké*, with the Sirens' song probably originates with Epicurus.⁴ If we suppose that the knowledge they impart fails to remove any disturbance, even if it does provide some kinetic pleasure, then it will serve as a fitting analogue to the useless teaching of the *mathématikoi*. Porphyry sums it up this way: "Empty is the argument of the philosopher by which no human disease is healed..."⁵ The same would apply to the disciplines: insofar as the study of grammar or geometry fails to eliminate unnatural and unnecessary desires, and fails to produce tranquility, it is empty. Sextus puts it more succinctly in his opening remarks: Epicurus maintained that studying *mathémata* cannot possibly lead us to wisdom (*M* 1.1, 1.4).⁶

From Epicurus' perspective the professors' fundamental deception is in claiming to reveal the truth; their disciplines are built on false principles regarding non-existent entities. As a consequence, those who promise to improve the lives of their students are guilty of a second deception since they are capable of producing

³ *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 190.

⁴ Blank cites Diogenes Laertius' report of Epicurus commanding Pythocles to flee from education on his boat (DL 10.6) and Plutarch's suggestion that we should plug the ears of the young and send them off in their Epicurean boats to flee the pernicious influence of poetry (*Aud. Poet.* 15d-16a): *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Grammarians*, trans. D.L. Blank (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 111-13, cf. xl-xli, xlix.

⁵ Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy: Introductory Readings* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997, 2nd ed.), 97. Like Epicurus, Seneca criticizes those who accumulate the "useless furniture of learning" because it makes us troublesome, self-satisfied bores and impairs our ability to grasp the essentials (Letter 88.36-7).

⁶ Quite the contrary, as Bett (*Disciplines*, 28) has recently suggested, cultivating the disciplines would seem to the Epicurean to be preparing us to take our place in "the turmoil-filled and anxiety-inducing society outside" of the garden.

neither knowledge nor tranquility. Sextus is quite happy to employ these Epicurean arguments to counterbalance the bold claims of the *mathêmatikoi*. And this convincingly explains the appearance of negative dogmatism in *M* 1-6. But as a skeptic Sextus neither affirms nor denies that the art of grammar, for example, reveals *ta onta* or that it may lead its students to wisdom, happiness or tranquility.⁷ Having suspended judgment regarding such claims, we might think he can only report the deceptiveness of the disciplines and their rational methods as part of his dialectical strategy and not in his own voice. For deception appears to be parasitic on truth: I cannot coherently claim that a statement is deceptive without presupposing conditions in which that statement would have been true. If so, Sextus should not say that professors and philosophers deceive us by affirming some proposition as true, when in fact it is false, or by convincing us through their teaching that we have acquired knowledge when we have not. Since the skeptic is not able to determine for himself when a statement is true or false, or when a proposition is or is not justified, the very notion of deception becomes problematic.

Nevertheless, I will argue that there is a skeptically acceptable interpretation of the Sirens' deception and that understanding the nature of this deception clarifies Sextus' defense of ordinary life. To anticipate: just as the Sirens prevent sailors from returning home to their families and daily routines, philosophers and professors prevent their students from effectively engaging in ordinary life and achieving tranquility, even if this is not their intention. The deception then is not epistemic but rather practical. It is not a matter of leading us to assent to false or unjustified conclusions—the deception is rather a distraction from, or even corruption of, ordinary life.⁸ To avoid this, Sextus would have us embrace Timon's advice to pay no attention to "the whirling of sweet-voiced wisdom" (*M* 11.1), or perhaps if we are brave enough, to tie ourselves to our masts as we sail by.

⁷ See Jonathan Barnes, "Scepticism and the Arts," in *Method, Medicine and Metaphysics*, ed. R. J. Hankinson (*Apeiron* 21.2, 1988), 72-73.

⁸ For a similar view regarding the threat to *koinos bios* posed by the teachers of the various theoretical *technai*, see Emidio Spinelli, "Pyrrhonism and the specialized sciences," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 258-59.

I

In the programmatic introduction to the *Outlines*, Sextus comments on the skeptic's use of what is apparent (*to phainomenon*, *PH* 1.19-20). He does not investigate what appears, if we understand that as a passively received impression (*phantasian pathêtikên*). That honey tastes sweet (when it does) is given, and leads the skeptic involuntarily to go along with it, e.g. by continuing to eat the honey, assuming he likes sweet things. As we find in the next section and in his discussion of the fourfold observances (*PH* 1.21, 23-24), the skeptic relies on such appearances as criteria of action (cf. also *M* 7.29-34). If these appearances involve no assertions about non-evident matters, or in other words if they 'say' nothing about reality, then they cannot possibly be deceptive. Of course this does not mean they are accurate, but rather that they aren't the sorts of thing that can either tell the truth or lie.⁹ The skeptic's reports regarding these appearances—his avowals—are neither true nor false.¹⁰ This explains why such appearances are not subject to investigation; for if they have nothing to tell us, we won't bother to ask them anything. And it follows that these appearances and their corresponding avowals can play no role in rational inference, because inferences are composed of propositions that make definite assertions.

Acting in accordance with such appearances is not a specifically skeptical accomplishment. In fact, most of us, most of the time act in this unreflective, more or less automatic manner. We typically wake in the morning and go about our

⁹ The notion that some assertions lack a truth value (for whatever reason) may derive from the view Timon attributes to Pyrrho, namely, that it is necessary for those who wish to be tranquil to trust neither their senses nor their opinions, or judgments, *for they neither tell the truth nor lie* (*mête tas aisthêseis hemôn mête tas doxas alêtheuein he pseudesthai. dia touto oun mêde pisteuein autais dein*, Eusebius, *Praep. Ev.* 14.18.3). For discussion of this passage in its full context, see Richard Bett, *Pyrrho, His Antecedents, and His Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 14-62.

¹⁰ What constitutes the distinctive features of such speech-acts remains controversial, especially insofar as deciding between the two main options—referring exclusively to the *pathos* it reports rather than the external world, or employing a non-assertive modality regardless of what the assertion refers to—has important implications for the larger issue of the scope of *epochê*. I agree with the views of Jonathan Barnes, "Pyrrhonism, Belief and Causation. Observations on the Scepticism of Sextus Empiricus," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.36.4 (1990): 2608-95, and Jacques Brunschwig, "The *hoson epi tô logô* Formula in Sextus Empiricus," in *Papers in Hellenistic Philosophy*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 244-58.

routines without a thought to whether the world is as it seems or whether it is right or good that we should behave in the manner that we do. As I make a cup of coffee, or walk the dog, I am not thinking *about* my experience. As I step off the sidewalk to make room for oncoming pedestrians I am not consciously aware of the appearances that I respond to *as* appearances. I merely go along, just as Sextus describes the skeptic's passive, involuntary acquiescence (*PH* 1.230). Since this sort of appearance plays such a central, and in fact indispensable, role in our day-to-day lives, I will refer to them as *ordinary*. It is only when I adopt a philosophical frame of mind that I begin to wonder whether it is worthwhile to drink coffee or walk the dog, whether I might be dreaming, whether my senses might deceive me, etc. Why *do* I do these things? *How* do I do these things? This sort of reflection tends to detach us from the activity we are engaged in by shifting our attention towards the appearances *as* appearances, and it allows us to pose the fundamental question of whether they correspond to non-evident objects in the world and hence whether they might deceive us.

This is precisely what the skeptic *does* investigate, namely what is said about appearances as far as the argument goes (*hoson epi tō logo*).¹¹ It is against such *logoi* that the skeptic develops his arguments, not for the sake of denying that ordinary appearances appear however they do but to reveal the rashness of the dogmatists; “for if reason is such a deceiver that it all but snatches even what is apparent [i.e. ordinary appearances] from under our very eyes, surely we should keep watch on it in unclear matters, to avoid being led into rashness by following it” (*PH* 1.20).¹² Brunschwig emphasizes the point that “what is *said* about the phenomenon constitutes the precise object of the skeptic's doubt: the *logos* itself is described as deceptive because it is capable of overturning even the most manifest sensible evidence and, *a fortiori*, of straying into the domain of the *adêla*.”¹³

I believe we should follow Brunschwig in understanding *logos* here as the practice of drawing inferences to arrive at conclusions regarding unclear matters. But if we grant that ordinary appearances have nothing to “say” about the way the world really is, they cannot be contradicted by the conclusions of rational

¹¹ To ask such questions of appearances presupposes that they have something to say, that they come bundled with propositions or judgments. This is also what allows us to oppose appearances to thoughts (*PH* 1.31-33).

¹² *Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8.

¹³ Brunschwig, “Formula,” 256.

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inferences, and hence should not be threatened by them. So how can the rational practice of drawing inferences undermine ordinary appearances and the conduct of ordinary life that relies on them?

II

We can get a better sense of Sextus' skeptical view of the deceptiveness of reason by examining his discussion of sophisms (*PH* 2.229-59). For here we find, by contrast, the dialecticians' dogmatic view on the same topic.

Sextus' characterization of his opponents is clearly sarcastic. Dialecticians glorify the 'science' that reveals the deceptiveness of reason, i.e. those inferences that obscure or abuse the truth by generating specious plausibility. They earnestly offer to teach us their techniques, as if coming to the aid of tottering commonsense (*bios*). And having propounded some sophistic silliness, proving for example that you have horns, they knit their brows and solemnly set about resolving the sophism to prove that you do *not* have horns.

Such resolutions are utterly unnecessary according to Sextus. And when the resolution of a sophism would be useful, for example in dispelling the specious plausibility of a medical conclusion, it is not the dialectician but the physician who has the relevant insight. The physicians will reject the conclusion on the basis of his experience, not because it fails to follow from the premises. In general, dialectic is superfluous because the false conclusion of a sophism is either manifestly false and absurd to all, which eliminates the need of any special, dialectical expertise, or it is only detectable by someone with the relevant (skeptically acceptable) expertise based on experience, which once again eliminates the need for the science of dialectic (*PH* 2.236-40, 247-51).¹⁴

In either case, it may sound as if Sextus is claiming that commonsense provides us with a criterion of truth that he prefers to the dialectician's supposedly scientific technique for resolving sophisms. How else could it be that the falsity of some conclusion is either manifestly false and absurd to all or discernible only by means of the more extensive experience of the skillful practitioner? While Sextus *does* appeal to what is evident to commonsense in this way, it is only in the service of the skeptic's oppositional *dynamis*. When the dialectician argues that snow is black, that nothing comes into being or moves, or that we have horns, we need not resort to his

¹⁴ Cf. *M* 1.233, Blank, *Grammarians*, 251. This approach is very similar, if not identical, to Cicero's (probably Carneadean) argument against the Stoic claim that dialectic enables us to judge between truth and falsehood (*Acad.* 2.91).

dialectical ‘science’ to undermine this nonsense; “it is no doubt enough to shatter their positive affirmation with the equipollent disconfirmation given by what is apparent” (*PH* 2.244).¹⁵ Sextus’ reference here to the appearance as equipollent disconfirmation or equally forceful counterevidence (*isosthenês antimarturêsis*) indicates that we are no longer dealing with ordinary appearances, but rather with those that provide testimony, or have something to say: the judgmental correlates of ordinary appearance. Sextus is not attempting to correct the sophistic deception, but simply to counter it.

We find the same approach in Sextus’ humorous anecdote about the dialectician Diodorus asking the physician Herophilus to treat his dislocated shoulder. Assuming that Diodorus had been sincere in his sophistical inferences, it would have come to appear to him, intellectually, that motion is not real. Were he to faithfully follow where reason led, he would have to agree with Herophilus’ inconvenient application of his own argument. For either his shoulder was dislocated in a place in which it was or in a place in which it wasn’t, but since neither of these is possible, he cannot have dislocated his shoulder. Sextus does not offer Diodorus’ demand for treatment as either a refutation of the view that motion is unreal, or as proof that motion is real.¹⁶ Rational inference is capable of deceiving by distraction. As Sextus puts it, “It is enough to live by experience and without opinions, in accordance with the common observations and preconceptions, and to suspend judgment about what is said with dogmatic superfluity and far beyond the needs of ordinary life” (*PH* 2.246).¹⁷

The point is that ordinary life is in no need of being rescued by dialecticians. It is not tottering in the first place and it does not need to be improved through subtle philosophical reasoning. What ordinary life needs is to be fortified against the temptations of reason’s promise to reveal things that are unclear by nature. This temptation may take the form of the sophistic production of specious plausibility as well as the dialectician’s refutations, but ultimately it is the seductive promise to reveal *ta onta* (cf. *M* 8.156-58).

¹⁵ Annas and Barnes, *Outlines*, 135.

¹⁶ Sextus similarly appeals to the appearances of ordinary life as evidence for the reality of motion in *M* 10.45 ff. Compare the dogmatic way that Dr. Johnson supposedly refuted Berkeley’s idealism, as if he could prove the existence of matter by kicking a stone, and G. E. Moore’s famous appeal to commonsense propositions as being more evidently true and trustworthy than any skeptical hypothesis that could be conjured to challenge them.

¹⁷ Annas and Barnes, *Outlines*, 136. Sextus frequently refers to the dogmatists’ excessive curiosity and needless investigations, e.g.: *PH* 3.151, *M* 1.278, 2.59, 2.74-75, 5.5.

When Sextus appeals to commonsense or ordinary life in opposition to philosophical views, as in the case of Diodorus' dislocated shoulder, or more generally on the question of whether motion is real (*PH* 3.65), he is appealing to what contemporary philosophers would call intuitions. Recent experimental philosophy has raised some important critical questions about the use of intuitions as premises, especially given their variability relative to culture, the situation in which they occur, or even the questions and thought-experiments used to summon them.¹⁸ But since Sextus only offers these dialectically he need not take a stand on their epistemic reliability. The complication arises from the fact that Sextus *also* appeals to commonsense or ordinary life as the skeptic's (and the ordinary person's) practical criterion of action.

The same pattern emerges in the presentation of the Tenth Mode, which is employed to achieve *epoché* with regard to questions of what one should or should not do. To this end, Sextus mixes and matches ways of life, customs, laws, and mythic beliefs right along with dogmatic judgments (*PH* 1.145). In order to oppose, for example, the custom of tattooing babies with the custom of not tattooing babies, we must take these as implicitly asserting the propositions that it is right, good, commendable, etc. to (or not to) tattoo one's baby. Similarly, the practice of praying for good things is opposed to the Epicurean dogma that such prayer is futile due to the indifference of the gods. And the way of life of athletes who sacrifice and suffer for the sake of glory is opposed to a philosophical, dogmatic rejection of the value of glory.¹⁹

Having suspended judgment on all such matters, the skeptic may still be inclined to tattoo his baby, pray to the gods, or seek glory. He simply will not do so in accordance with the intuition that these are *in fact* good or appropriate actions, and that those who behave otherwise are mistaken, but rather involuntarily and unreflectively in accordance with the corresponding *ordinary* appearances.

III

It might be objected that I have been too generous in allowing for such an extensive variety of ordinary appearances. Sextus' original example, that honey has a sweetening effect, suggests that we might have to limit ordinary appearances to immediate, present, sensory experience. But it is clear that the skeptic, like ordinary

¹⁸ Jonathan M. Wienberg, Shaun Nichols, and Stephen Stich, "Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions," *Philosophical Topics* 29, no. 1 & 2 (2001): 429-60.

¹⁹ *PH* 1.148, 155, 158; cf. *PH* 3.65, *M* 9.33, 50, 138, 10.45.

people unreflectively follows all sorts of cultural and social norms in day-to-day life. If asked why he behaved as he did when in the market, he will say that that is just what one does and how one speaks in such cases. For example, if he wants to buy a loaf of bread, he will ask for it in a way that produces the desired result. There is nothing mysterious about our ability to perceive cultural norms and expectations. It would be counterproductive and foolish to ask for bread at the supermarket in Old English or Homeric Greek. This would be a violation of what we may refer to as the When-in-Rome principle: we speak Thracian in Thrace, and Latin in Rome; we use philosophical terms among philosophers, medical terms among physicians, (*M1.218, 232*), and we use whatever currency is accepted rather than coining our own and trying to pass it off as legitimate (*M1.177-79*).²⁰ The reason it is necessary to follow the usage of the many is simply so that we can make ourselves understood and not appear ridiculous or be hindered in meeting our needs (*M1.193*).²¹

This is in stark contrast with the foolishness of taking the agreement of the many as a reliable criterion of truth (*PH 2.22-47*). Here Sextus argues that if the many genuinely agree about something, then it is the result of a single, shared, epistemic condition. But in that case, their being many becomes irrelevant when considering whether this shared condition is more reliable than say an expert condition that yields conflicting views. Sextus' larger aim is to show that when the judgment of the many conflicts with the judgment of the expert few, we have no rational basis on which to non-arbitrarily prefer one to the other. The When-in-Rome principle is neither intended to nor capable of resolving disputes. It simply guides our actions relative to some circumstance, and strictly in accordance with ordinary appearances, which play no role in philosophical controversies.

But if the skeptic acts only on the basis of ordinary appearances, and if these are as insulated from rational inference as I have argued, then it seems the skeptic is unable to act on, engage with, or respond to the intellectual appearances involved in philosophical discourse. Involuntary acquiescence to ordinary appearances may explain how the skeptic goes about his daily life, but this would seem to render him inactive in philosophical or theoretical contexts, where there are no relevant, ordinary appearances to respond to. If the When-in-Rome principle, or more

²⁰ Blank, *Grammarians*, 212-13.

²¹ More generally, the relevant sense of utility that Sextus appeals to throughout *M1-6* will simply emerge from the patterns of production and consumption displayed by the community. For example, the fact that cities do not expel the useful arts (*PH 2.20*) does not presuppose any intentional, collective judgment based on a shared, let alone precise, notion of utility.

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generally action in accordance with laws and customs (*PH* 1.23-24), does not guide his behavior in these intellectual circumstances, what does? We might appeal to the first of the skeptic's four observances to explain this: we are naturally guided to perceive and think. But it is implausible to suppose that nature guides us to approve some forms of rational inference and reject others. If that were true, teaching introductory formal logic would be much easier than it is. In any case, whatever this natural form of thinking is supposed to be, Sextus never provides further explicit elaboration.

IV

Since the practice of philosophical inquiry and dispute is itself conventional or customary (whether or not that is *all* it is), I believe the preferable response is to extend the When-in-Rome principle to such intellectual contexts. In effect, I am proposing, on behalf of Sextus, to naturalize logic in the service of skeptical inquiry. If we allow that logic is merely a codification of actual linguistic and inferential practice, rather than some more ambitiously platonic sort of thing (and of course much more would need to be said about what such alternatives really amount to), then we may see it as another type of customary behavior falling under the When-in-Rome principle. And so, in using the tools of logical inference, just as when using other conventional modes of communication, the skeptic need not unwittingly take on any problematic epistemic or doxastic commitments.

The ways in which philosophers and theoreticians talk about the phenomenon are at least in part conventional—the variability in what counts as a good argument, paper or presentation from one discipline to another, or even one department to another in the same discipline, along with well-reasoned doubts about the extent to which critical thinking skills may be transferable from one context to another,²² all testify to that. However, in adopting the language of philosophy when

²² It remains controversial whether there is a single account of critical thinking that applies across a wide range of contexts, or whether critical thinking varies in accordance with disciplinary methods, epistemological views, and problems addressed. Among the generalists in this ongoing debate are: Peter Facione, *Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction* (Millbrae, CA: The California Academic Press, 1990) and Robert Ennis, "The Degree to which Critical Thinking is Subject Specific: Clarification and Needed Research" in *The Generalizability of Critical Thinking*, ed. Stephen P. Norris (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992), 21-37. In the opposed, specificist camp are J. McPeck, "Thoughts on Subject Specificity" in Norris, *Generalizability*, 198-205, and Dwight Atkinson, "A Critical Approach to Critical Thinking," *TESOL Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (1997): 71-94.

speaking to philosophers, the skeptic must not also adopt or endorse the norms of rational inference as well. At least he must not do so in a way that will make him vulnerable to the epistemic deceptiveness of reason and the disturbance it yields. Fortunately, we may think of the skeptic's adherence to these logical norms as analogous to his adherence to linguistic and cultural norms, neither of which commit him to any truth claims.²³

In fact, when he introduces the Ten Modes, Sextus explicitly refrains from making any positive claim about their precise number or power (*dynamis*), for it is possible that there are more than ten or that they are unsound (*sathros*, *PH* 1.35).²⁴ Since the possibility that the modes are *sathros* is a reason not to comment on their *power*, Sextus' doubt is aimed not at a specifically logical property of the modes, but at their potency, i.e. their ability to achieve their explicit end of inducing *epoché*. If so, he is anticipating the therapeutic conclusion to the *Outlines*: just as the physician adjusts the strength of the remedy to the strength of the illness, the philanthropic skeptic adjusts the strength of his counter-arguments to the strength of his interlocutor's dogmatic affliction, i.e. the depth and complexity of the rational grounds for his convictions (*PH* 3.280-81).

The Pyrrhonist's practice is intentionally designed to enable the skeptic to use all the tools of rational inference to combat the seductive siren song of reason. Dialectically, the strategy is to show the dogmatist that he is incapable of adhering to the rational standards that he imposes on himself, especially the injunctions against arbitrarily endorsing any statement as true, or endorsing any statement that implies a contradiction.²⁵ Sextus frequently appeals to the notion of absurdity in these dialectical contexts. For example, he argues that if time is limited (rather than infinite), then "there was a time when there was no time (before it began), and there will be a time when there is no time (after it has ceased)—and this is absurd" (*PH* 3.141).²⁶ In other words, the supposition that time has a beginning and end, implies

²³ For an opposing view with regard to the rational commitments required by serious engagement in inquiry and genuine desire for truth, see Casey Perin, *The Demands of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²⁴ See also *PH* 1.196, where Sextus only allows the skeptic to say that opposed arguments *appear* to be equal with respect to being convincing or unconvincing, but not that they *are* equal. I take it this means the skeptic is not willing to comment on whatever feature of reality is supposed to correlate to the notion of validity.

²⁵ See Markus Lammenranta, "The Pyrrhonian Problematic," in *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, ed. John Greco (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9-33.

²⁶ Annas and Barnes, *Outlines*, 181.

the contradiction that there is a time in which there is no time. Regardless of the merits of this argument, it is clear that Sextus would not have us accept the conclusion that time is infinite. For he also derives an absurdity from that very claim: both past and future must be present in an infinite expanse of time (*PH* 3.142, *M* 6.62, 65). These reductios are in turn in the service of another reductio (or *modus tollens* if you prefer): if time exists, it is either limited or infinite, but we have seen time is neither limited nor infinite. And the grand conclusion that time does not exist is itself balanced against the philosophical intuition, as far as the appearances go, that time does exist (*PH* 3.136).

It should be noted that the way we ordinarily pay attention to time—rushing to a meeting, or ignoring the alarm clock on weekends—is above and beyond the fray. The reality of time doesn't arise as an issue in ordinary life. When it does arise in philosophical contexts, we begin to feel the seductive pull of reason promising us a rational resolution of the anomalies and an insight into the hidden nature of reality. But instead we are (or at least some of us, some of the time are) led to absurdities, anomalies, and disturbance. In yet another metaphor, Sextus says, "If a road is leading us to a precipice, we do not drive ourselves over the precipice because there is a road leading to it; rather, we leave the road because of the precipice; similarly, if there is an argument leading us to something agreed to be absurd, we do not assent to the absurdity because of the argument—rather, we abandon the argument because of the absurdity" (*PH* 2.252).²⁷

Let us imagine the skeptic and his dogmatic interlocutor standing at the edge of this precipice in order to consider how the analogous absurdity, in the form of a logical contradiction, appears to each. The skeptic does not endorse the principle of non-contradiction (in any of its forms, metaphysical, doxastic, etc.). However, that's not to say that he will flaunt it insofar as contradicting oneself runs counter to the customary expectations of both ordinary people and philosophers that we express ourselves in clear, or at least comprehensible, terms. So while the skeptic will not willfully contradict himself, he will not see contradiction as a necessary indication of falsehood, nor will he see consistency as an indication of truth. In any case, he may feel inclined to withhold assent from absurdities and contradictions insofar as assenting to them threatens to undermine his ability to effectively communicate and engage with others.

For the dogmatist who accepts the principle of non-contradiction, the absurdity will appear to be obviously false or at least unjustifiable or untenable.

²⁷ Annas and Barnes, *Outlines*, 137.

Insofar as the road, i.e. the argument, has led him to this conclusion, he will feel compelled to diagnose the epistemic deception. He may then set off on the futile, though alluring, task of combatting the deception by means of a supposedly correct use of reason. And this calls forth the familiar refrain of the reciprocal mode: once we question the reliability of a method, standard or criterion, it is illegitimate to appeal to that very thing to justify or correct itself. In fact, Sextus frequently characterizes such attempts as absurd: it is absurd to try to establish the matter under investigation through the matter under investigation (e.g., *PH* 1.61, 2.36, 2.122, *M* 10.13); it is absurd to allow a party to the dispute to adjudicate the dispute (e.g., *PH* 1.90).²⁸ Similarly, if we begin to suspect that reason is in some instances deceptive, as for example in the case of the sorites, where apparently true premises and apparently valid inferences lead to apparently false conclusions, it would be absurd to appeal to reason itself to diagnose those deceptions.

Chrysippus and the Stoics famously claimed to simply stop answering soritical questions at some point to avoid being led into assenting to an absurdity (*Acad.* 2.92-94). But it remains highly controversial as to whether there is a convincing explanation for why and at what point they are rationally entitled to go mute. From the skeptical perspective, they are engaged in a disturbing and seemingly unwinnable task. The skeptic avoids absurdities, contradictions, and walking off cliffs simply because that's what one does.²⁹ In order to preserve the reliability of rational inference, however, the dogmatist must explain why we don't walk off dialectical cliffs, and how, on occasion, reason leads us astray.

V

In conclusion, the deception of reason takes two forms. The first, epistemic deception, is not an immediate or personal concern for the skeptic, but only enters into his dialectical and therapeutic strategy. Having suspended judgment with

²⁸ There is also an important application of the reciprocal mode to custom (*sunêtheia*) itself. In arguing against the unnecessary theoretical excesses of the grammarians, Sextus says that it is absurd to attempt to correct ordinary usage by means of the theoretical device of analogy insofar as that device itself appeals to the standard of ordinary usage (*M* 1.200, cf. 8.344). This amounts to treating *sunêtheia* as untrustworthy insofar as it needs to be corrected on one hand and as trustworthy insofar as it provides the means for making the corrections on the other.

²⁹ The view I am defending may be seen as an anticipation of Wittgenstein insofar as the skeptic aims to keep the fly from getting into the fly bottle in the first place: *Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1968) §309.

regard to whether any criterion of truth is reliable, he disqualifies himself for the time being from judging whether the conclusion to any argument is false, or true. In effect he has suspended judgment with regard to whether rational inference is deceptive or whether there are correct and incorrect uses of reason. However, as a philanthropist, he is interested in relieving the dogmatist of his troubling concern that some rational inferences deceptively indicate the truth of their conclusions by producing the mere appearance of plausibility.

The second, practical deception may be an ongoing, personal concern for the skeptic. For even after acquiring the disposition that leads him to suspend judgment, the natural, deep-seated desire to learn *ta onta* may persist (*M*1.42, 7.27). This desire, which he compares to the Sirens' song, calls us to reflect on our experience in a way that exceeds the needs of ordinary life (cf. *PH* 2.246, 3.151, *M* 1.54-55, 5.5). To answer this call requires us to transform our ordinary appearances into philosophical intuitions that are supposed to be capable of indicating the truth. But as this adds nothing to the action-guiding force of ordinary appearances it is superfluous to the needs of ordinary life. And once the appearance has something to say about the world it will conflict with what other appearances say, which ushers in anomalies and puzzles, producing the sort of disturbance that skepticism is designed to cure. Such a corruption of ordinary appearances is, I believe, what Sextus has in mind when he says that reason all but snatches appearances from our eyes (*PH*1.20).

A virtue of this interpretation is that it accounts for the impression that Sextus vacillates in his attitude towards ordinary life. As I claimed earlier, he does not think that ordinary life needs to be rescued or improved by means of subtle philosophical reasoning. But this is not to say that he thinks ordinary life is fine as it is.³⁰ If that were the case, there would be no need for the skeptic's philanthropy. Sextus thinks that ordinary people are as prone to interminable and disturbing controversies as philosophers (*PH* 1.165) even if they don't have the leisure or inclination to pursue the resolutions as zealously. Ordinary people disagree about which gods exist (*M* 9.191-92); whether health, wealth or wisdom is the greatest good (*M* 11.49), unless it is sex, gluttony, drunkenness, or gambling (*PH*3.180); and even whether apparent things are intelligible or perceptible (*M*8.355). And they unwittingly add to their own suffering by believing that the unfortunate circumstances they may find themselves in are bad by nature (*PH* 1.30). We may understand all of these critical

³⁰ In support of the idea that Sextus does not merely endorse ordinary life, but wants to reform and improve it, see Filip Grgic, "Skepticism and Everyday Life," in *New Essays on Ancient Pyrrhonism*, ed. Diego Machuca (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 72.

remarks about *bios* as stemming from the natural human desire to discover the hidden nature of things. Insofar as ordinary people are vulnerable to the Siren song of reason they are lured over the precipice into the same sorts of absurdities and disturbances as philosophers and professors.³¹ On the other hand, this critique also reveals what Sextus finds admirable and worth preserving. Ordinary life, in accordance with the skeptic's four observances, has all the resources we need to actively and tranquilly engage with the world.

If human beings never succumbed to the temptation to theorize about the hidden features of reality, Pyrrhonian skepticism could not have come into being. In this sense it is parasitic on dogmatism. But in another, equally important sense, it appears that dogmatism is parasitic on ordinary life. In fact, the dogmatic parasite is more truly parasitic insofar as he gives nothing of any value back to his host. At least as it seems to Sextus, ordinary life profits in no discernible way by the dogmatists' theorizing.

³¹ In an extreme case, we have Socrates proclaiming himself unable to consider his personal misfortune in weighing the arguments for and against abiding by the Athenians' verdict. Only reason and argument can be placed on the scales and as long as there are no better arguments, he will patiently await his own death (*Crito* 46b). Socrates' conviction to follow reason wherever it leads will seem to be admirable and even heroic to the dogmatist whereas to the skeptic it will seem to be as absurd as following the road over the precipice.