

The Pyrrhonian Skeptic's *Telos*

Dan Moller

Early on in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*PH*), Sextus Empiricus offers an account of τὸ τέλος τῆς σκεπτικῆς—the aim or final end of Pyrrhonian skepticism. Having previously explained such crucial aspects of Pyrrhonism as the sense in which Skeptics do not hold any beliefs and what its constitutive principles are, in *PH* i 25-30 Sextus turns to what he seems to regard as the equally important matter of what the aim of Skepticism is. He tells us,

An aim (τέλος) is that for the sake of which everything is done or considered, while it is not done or considered for the sake of anything else. Or: an aim is the final object of desire. Up to now we say the aim of the Skeptic is tranquility (ἀταραξία) in matters of opinion and moderation of feeling (μετριότητα) in matters forced on us.¹ (*PH* i 25)

In the sense of 'ethics' relevant to the Ancients, this constitutes Sextus' major pronouncement on ethics in the general survey of Skepticism contained in *PH* i, apart from the specific arguments of the Tenth Mode (*PH* i 145-163). It is perhaps unsurprising that Sextus' ethics, the heart of which is evident even in the brief quotation above, seem to have struck readers as less troublesome than his epistemology; it would be hard to compete with the total disavowal of belief and knowledge for philosophical shock-value.² Nevertheless, as I will be arguing, Sextus' ethics present major problems for the student of Skepticism—problems at least as interesting as those arising from the more frequently discussed Pyrrhonian epistemology. But those commentators who have touched on difficulties with Sextus' ethics have, I think, tended to push the wrong points, and so we shall have to work our way forward gradually. The main goal will be to state what exactly, if anything, is problematic about a Pyrrhonian skeptic having and endorsing a specific τέλος.

I

One difficulty that has been raised in connection with the Skeptical aim relates to other-concern. In *PH* iii 280-281 Sextus explains why the Skeptic bothers to

¹ *PH* translations are, with modifications, from Annas and Barnes 1994. For the sake of concision I will be concentrating on the first element of Sextus' account—on ἀταραξία.

² Of course, many writers have discussed whether the Skeptic can 'live' his Skepticism, which is a broadly ethical matter—see, e.g., Burnyeat 1983a. But this issue is usually discussed in relation to Pyrrhonian epistemology, not the Pyrrhonian's aims. Sedley 1983 touches on the aim given by Sextus and its relation to eth. in *Skepticism's Aim* (see *Classical Antiquity*).

engage dialectically with dogmatists, whom he cannot regard himself as likely to profit from, since the dogmatist can at best offer proof of his views and the mature Skeptic takes a rather dim view even of proof (*PH* ii 134ff.). Sextus' explanation—his last word in the *Outlines*—is that 'Skeptics are philanthropic' and interact with misguided dogmatists in order to 'cure' them by means of argument. Just as there are remedies for those with bodily afflictions, Sextus tells us, so the philanthropic skeptic offers remedies for those afflicted with dogmatism. And there is no indication that Sextus is being disingenuous, let alone ironic, here; the medicinal metaphor is recurring (see, e.g., *PH* i 206) and appears to be quite sincere. (Since Sextus himself seems to have been a doctor, this trope must have come quite naturally.) So the Skeptic is genuinely concerned about the dogmatism of others around him. But is he concerned about other, less intellectual problems people around him might have? Sextus does not address this point directly, but some readers have come away with the impression that Sextus' *other-concern* is *exclusively dedicated to the extirpation of dogmatism*. Thus Julia Annas writes,

[T]he sceptic will not be exercised about others' mundane problems like toothache, poverty or unrequited love. These could only bother him if he believed that these were bad things, which of course he does not—he does not believe that anything is good or bad after working through the sceptical arguments about ethics. What can really bother him, it appears, is only the intellectual problems of other people—their dogmatism or holding of beliefs. (Annas 1993, 246)

This suggestion about the confinement of the Skeptic's genuine other-concern to people's beliefs is puzzling. If the Skeptic's failure to believe anything about the goodness or badness of his neighbor's toothache is sufficient to make impossible any genuine concern on the part of the Skeptic, it is unclear why the same is not true of his lack of belief about the goodness or badness of his neighbor's dogmatism. Why does the Skeptic's lack of the relevant belief make concern impossible in the one case but not in the other? If it is correct that the consistent Skeptic will look on the toothaches of his acquaintances with indifference, why should he not feel the same way about their much less perspicuous belief-states? Annas does not say and it is hard to see what the answer could be.

If there is a problem about other-concern, it would appear that it is a perfectly general one, not isolated to certain aspects of other people's circumstances. But thus generalized, the problem can indeed begin to seem imposing; it can seem that there is no way the Skeptic can consistently show much other-concern at all, given his goal of tranquility. The difficulty is that other-concern may seem to be essentially related to being *troubled* or *disturbed* by various things that happen to the people one knows, and the Skeptic's goal is supposed to be avoiding just that; ἀτραπεξία literally means 'untroubledness' or 'freedom from disturbance'. If one were to be completely detached from the misfortunes others undergo—were to view these with perfect tranquility—then it is not clear one could really talk of

other-concern at all.³ And in fact throughout *Adversus Mathematicos* (*M* xi 110-167 Sextus argues that it is possible to be happy (εὐδαίμων) just in case we suspend judgment concerning what is good and bad by nature, including, presumably, the circumstances the people we know are in. This is both because, in that case, our beliefs about what is bad will trouble us (since it is disconcerting to believe that something that is by nature bad is occurring) and because we will then be anxious to attain what is good. Sextus tells us that someone who does hold that there are intrinsically good and bad things

is swept about by never-ending disturbances (ταραχῶν) while he avoids some things and pursues others, and he draws on himself many bad things for the sake of the good, afflicted by many times more bad things because of his beliefs about the bad things.⁴ (*M* xi 145)

If this is the case, the Skeptic appears to face a dilemma: either he has genuine *other-concern* or he does not.⁵ If he does not, he is committed to an *unattractive, inhuman way of life, at least as most of us would judge it. If he does, then he will seem to be failing to achieve his own aims, since (a) other-concern essentially involves acknowledging that some things others undergo are bad for them, (b) as Sextus' own comments on the subject indicate, that can only lead to disturbances, and (c) the aim of skepticism is freedom from disturbances.*

Sextus can of course reply that Skeptics simply do not care about other-concern, that it is no objection to the consistency of his Skepticism that its self-described aim is incompatible with genuine attachment to others. But this is surely the option of last resort, and in fact does not seem to represent Sextus' view. Sextus clearly wishes to present Skepticism as an attractive philosophy that is capable of making us happy (*M* xi 110-167) and that (roughly) preserves the basic character of ordinary life (βίος; *PH* i 23, ii 102, iii 2; *M* xi 165). And in his catalogues of changes brought on Skeptics by their Skepticism, Diogenes reports gentleness, tolerance, and a desire for privacy (ix 68, 108), but nothing so drastic as their no longer troubling themselves over the affairs of others.⁶ In any case, if the objection under discussion could not be met, Pyrrhonism would certainly begin to seem a deeply unappealing way of life for the prospective initiate.

It is better, then, to make a reply on behalf of the Skeptic that attempts to allay the anxieties about other-concern rather than to dismiss them. We might try something like the following: It is true that the Skeptic has no dogmatic beliefs (*PH* i 12). It is also true that the Skeptic does not believe (or deny) that there is

³ This would be true even if someone were motivated to aid those in difficulties around him. Caring about others involves more than merely being disposed to help them, though in any case it is hard to see *why* someone would be consistently moved to render aid if he were incapable of recognizing other people's suffering as something terrible.

⁴ *M* translations are, with modifications, from Bett 1997.

⁵ Annas remarks on this fork 1993, 247.

⁶ Cited in Nussbaum 1994, 313. I am unaware of any instance of the Skeptic's many ancient critics leveling this particular charge, as one would expect them to do if it were at all fair to Skepticism.

any thing good or bad by nature (*PH* iii 23; *M* xi 69). But it does not follow from this that his child's toothache (or the dogmatist's beliefs) cannot 'really bother him', as Annas claims. Consider a case: Sextus Jr. comes running up to Sextus wailing about his toothache. True, Sextus Sr. will not form the dogmatic belief that Junior has a toothache; nor, *a fortiori*, will he believe that Junior's circumstances are objectively bad and stand in need of a remedy. But, being a normal human being, he will in all likelihood be subjected to the appearance (*φαιντασία*, cf. *PH* i 19) that Junior is having a toothache and will experience an involuntary feeling (*ἀβούλητος πάθος*, cf. *PH* i 22) involving a surge of emotion, a slight quickening of his pulse, a constricted feeling in his chest, and so on, that will be followed by an inclination to help Junior alleviate his pain. All of this is just the natural reaction of a normally socialized member of our species; none of it involves dogmatic belief. And Sextus Senior *really* will be bothered if all this occurs, as it seems plausible that it would—being bothered just consists in these things.

One potential problem with this story, however, is Sextus' insistence on *μετρίοις* *οπάθειαι* as one of the aims of the Skeptic (*PH* i 25). Sextus argues at great length that part of the reason Skepticism leads to tranquility is that the lack of belief in the goodness or badness of any state of affairs will lead to a moderation in the involuntary feelings we have (*PH* i 25ff., iii 235ff.; *M* xi 110-167). At one point he says, 'But those who make no determination about what is good and bad by nature neither avoid nor pursue anything with intensity; and hence they are tranquil' (*PH* i 28). If this means that Skeptics are generally less given to the kinds of emotional bonding involved in meaningful relationships with others, or if they are supposed to be immune to the kinds of feelings typically involved in the sort of scenario described above, then Sextus' views about *μετρίοις* *οπάθειαι* will be incompatible with the defense I have sketched.

Sextus' point in the passages I have referred to, however, is neither that the intensity of our involuntary feelings need be abated by our lack of dogmatic beliefs about their objects, nor that certain feelings are supposed to be beneath (or above) the Skeptic. Look more closely at *PH* i 28, quoted just now: Sextus is not telling us anything about the feelings that simply come over us. He is referring only to the feelings that might arise as a result of our actively pursuing or avoiding things as a result of judging them to be objectively good or bad. Of course, the Skeptic will not engage in such pursuits and so he will be free from the attendant disturbances. But that leaves it open for the Skeptic to feel just what the rest of us feel when our children, say, are in pain, as long as he has those feelings as a result of normal socialization, not their active pursuit in the belief that they are objectively good. Sextus' claim is not that skeptics cannot have the normal reactions all of us have to the vicissitudes our loved ones undergo. The claim is rather that the *damage* these feelings do to our tranquility is sharply limited by our not judging the value of the object of our feelings. As Sextus puts it, 'For even if the person who suspends judgment about everything is disturbed (*ταράττεται*) by the presence of that which gives him pain, he still bears the distress more easily

compared with the dogmatist' (*M* xi 150). We will not, as Skeptics, be any less horrified by our child's pain (supposing we have been normally socialized); it is just that our horror will cause less disturbance in us if we do not think that it is objectively true that our child's pain is bad. How could this be so if the involuntary feelings to which the skeptic is subject may be just as intense as the non-skeptic's? Sextus' answer (*PH* i 29-30) is that,

[Skeptics] are disturbed by things which are forced upon them... But in these cases ordinary people are afflicted by two sets of circumstances: by the feelings themselves, and no less by believing that the circumstances are bad by nature. Skeptics, who shed the additional opinion that each of these things is bad in its nature, come off more moderately even in these cases.

So it is a mistake to see the Skeptic as somehow less able or willing to become emotionally involved with other people; he simply will be less disturbed by that involvement and its consequences because, whatever his involuntary feelings, he will not form a disturbing opinion that either his feelings or their object are bad in the nature of things.⁷

But if the Skeptic really is after freedom from disturbance, why will he not just avoid forming the kinds of relationships that will bring any disturbance at all, even if their effects are palliated by not making dogmatic value judgments? The answer, I think, is that to some extent he will. It should be conceded that certain kinds of relationships are unlikely to be attractive to the Skeptic, given his *τέλος*. Sextus, I imagine, would not have been a Wagnerian-opera enthusiast; *Tristan* and *Liebestod* in general would not have appealed to him. Arguably there are some kinds of relationships in which a high-strung torrid quality is intrinsic to the relationship itself, and these very (*ταραχί-ριφε*) feelings themselves are valued as objectively good, and are probably amplified in a kind of feedback loop as a result. Obviously this sort of thing is not consonant with the Pyrrhonist's aims. But then, there are those more ordinary relationships in which innate and social processes create emotional bonds and feelings for others that are not especially overwhelming and disturbing. And to go against them would often require an unnatural, dogmatic conviction. Also, other-concern can be exhibited in relation to mere acquaintances or even total strangers—relations involving few distur-

⁷ Nussbaum 1994, 313 actually argues that the Skeptic will lack all emotions, and hence will be incapable of the kind of committed relationships we most value. This is supposed to be because the 'canonical' emotions (fear, envy, love, etc.) are attitudes that involve belief. Though this is slightly afield from my main concern with the Skeptic's aims, it is worth mentioning that this is very far from obvious. The Skeptic will have appearances or impressions concerning the objects of his emotions, and these will be sufficient for the attitudes Nussbaum refers to. This might be contested, but then the Skeptic can just invoke *quasi*-attitudes and *quasi*-emotions based on appearances and ask why they are not just as worthwhile as the real thing. It is further worth noting that there is a general tendency to make the Skeptic out as a kind of wooden, emotionally flat Spock-type. But whether or not this was true of ancient Skeptics or advocated as a desirable result, I see no reason for thinking this the natural result of Skepticism as described in *PH* and *M*. Persons who are by nature possessed of (say) an irascible Mediterranean temperament will not suddenly change upon becoming Skeptics.

banes—and nothing said thus far suggests that the Skeptic might not come to be concerned about these others people's problems.

Recall how the objection to Skepticism we are now considering began: as the point that Sceptics are incapable of other-concern and so of normal human relationships. We have now reached the substantially weaker objection that certain kinds of relationships are beyond the Skeptic. This, even if true, is much less damaging. Wagner connoisseurs, Emily Bronte devotees, and hormonally disturbed teenagers will not be interested in the Skeptic way of life, just as anyone will be repelled by a way of life that leaves no room for pursuing the things he values. Since, presumably, something like this objection will apply to any way of life, we appear to be left with an objection without much bite.

2

The problem we have been discussing thus far could be described as practical—it involves what prospective Sceptics might regard as an unattractive consequence of actually living the Skeptical life. But there are also more abstract problems involving the Skeptic's aim as Sextus describes it. To begin with, consider the kind of treatment of the Skeptical aim someone who was familiar with Sextus' treatment of other subjects might expect. Perhaps he would expect, in rough outline, something like this:

The Stoics claim that *εὐδαιμονία* consists in living in harmony with nature. The Epicureans, by contrast, say that it consists in living a life of maximal pleasure. But, for quite general reasons, there is no resolving this clash of opinions (cf. e.g. the first Agrippan Mode, *PH* I 165). So the only option is to suspend judgment on the matter and neither to affirm nor to deny the existence of a final end.⁸

Of course, this kind of treatment is not what we get, either in the texts explicitly dedicated to the question of the *τέλος*, or in any other passages. As already noted, what we get is, 'Up to now we say the aim of the Skeptic is tranquility in matters of opinion and moderation of feeling in matters forced on us' (*PH* i 25).

This apparent deviation from the standard Skeptical approach raises a number of questions. One of these is whether the Skeptic is even entitled to have a *τέλος*. He certainly cannot have a substantive theory of the final end for human life. He cannot, that is, insist that he has discovered the objectively correct aim we should all have. He must, as always, be merely describing how things appear to him after having considered all the relevant evidence. But then we might want to know why he thinks that things will appear similarly to everyone or even anyone else. As Annas 1993, 245 puts it,

Is it in fact part of most people's appearances that we think of

ourselves as having a final end? and in particular untroubledness as a final end? ... what if, at the end of the argumentative day, most of [the Skeptic's] interlocutors ended up with the appearance that *ataraxia* was too passive to be a final end, and that our final end, whatever it turns out to be, must involve an element of striving?

And of course this complaint will seem to have special force if we bear in mind that Sextus consistently positions Skepticism as a rival to Stoicism and Epicureanism, whose adherents obviously possess quite different aims. It may then seem that Sextus is making impossibly strong empirical assumptions about the existence and character of a universal final end.

But this complaint is misguided. Sextus is describing the Skeptic, not the man or woman in the street.⁹ In *PH* i 25-30 Sextus is not attempting to gain some dialectical advantage from a supposed universal belief that untroubledness is the overall aim in life all people share. Rather, he is simply describing how it is for Sceptics, as is only natural in the course of the general characterization of the Skeptic way of life laid out in *PH* i. The only assumption Sextus requires, then, is that *Skeptics* are all uniform in respect to their *τέλη*, and this seems unobjectionable since Sextus is describing what it *is* to be a Skeptic. (The assumption may either be descriptively true (and why should it not be, since all Sceptics are initiated into a certain philosophical system, are taught a specific know-how) or else we might just regard it as stipulative on Sextus' part—he will acknowledge as Sceptics only those who have the aim of untroubledness.) And, this being the case, it is further peculiar of Annas 1993, 245 to insist that the Skeptic's position is especially weak since he cannot *argue* for his appearances if he is to avoid dogmatism; as we have just seen, Sextus has no need to argue for what is either a plain descriptive truth or else a stipulation on his part. Of course, Sextus no doubt wishes to present an attractive portrait of the Skeptical life, and so assumes that a life of tranquility will strike the prospective initiate as a tolerably good one. But this assumption is quite weak; though dogmatists might plausibly feel there ought to be more to life than merely not being troubled, they are not likely to be repelled by that state either.

Granting this point, some critics have suggested that the real problem is that the Skeptic *must* have the kind of dogmatic beliefs about his aim that Sextus is concerned systematically to deny (*PH* i 13-15). Nussbaum, having explained how a Skeptic might admit *ἀταραξία* as his aim only in a detached, non-dogmatic fashion, queries,

Is there any reason to think that the Skeptical position requires a more than Skeptical attachment to *ataraxia*? Yes... the Skeptic prefers his way to the dogmatic way; he recommends it...

⁸ The Stoics, Epicureans, and Sceptics all agreed, of course, on the identification of *εὐδαιμονία* with the *τέλος*. I should note, however, that Sextus has little to say about *εὐδαιμονία* or its relation to *ἀταραξία* in *PH*, though there is much more in *M*. (One might view this as a discrepancy between *PH* and *M*—it is certainly a striking and peculiar difference—but I will ignore this possibility.)

⁹ Annas may have been misled here because of her preoccupation with Stoics and especially Epicureans, who often *did* claim to be describing what was true as a matter of human nature, not just true of certain philosophers.

[If no further support were given for the Skeptical procedures beyond my imagined non-dogmatic claim, then [a prospective Skeptic] would have no reason to make an effort to turn from her habitual dogmatic ways. (Nussbaum 1994, 303)

The first and the last points about the Skeptic's preference for ἀταραξία and his need to provide dogmatists with reasons for adopting Skepticism, are not compelling. We may indeed infer from Sextus' general enthusiasm for tranquility that it is an end he prefers. But preferences need not involve the kind of judgment that one thing is better than another in the nature of things which the Skeptic abjures (PH iii 179–238). Sextus' preference for being free from disturbances may simply be the result of a natural inclination or else his upbringing, and needs no support from a theory of goodness. And though his interaction with the benighted dogmatist, in order not to be utterly pointless, does require presenting some sort of reason for the dogmatist to recognize the advantages of tranquility as an aim to pursue, notice that Sextus need not himself believe the conclusions of the arguments he presents, nor even accept the force of arguments in general (cf. PH iii 280–281). He merely recollects both the kinds of premises and the patterns of inference that dogmatists typically accept, and then argues, from those purely hypothetically adopted premises and inference-patterns, that the dogmatist will come to grief with his dogmatic aims (see M xi). So in the only sense in which it is true that the Skeptic ought to be giving the dogmatist reasons for sharing his aim, this is open to a benign Skeptical interpretation.

Strictly speaking, it is not even true, as Nussbaum claims, that Sextus recommends tranquility as an aim; Sextus nowhere tells the dogmatist that it would be better in the nature of things for him if he adopted the Skeptic's aim. Of course, it is easy to be misled by the many texts in which Sextus seems dogmatically to assert that ἀταραξία is to be identified with εὐδαιμονία, that ἀταραξία is a worthwhile thing we should all aim at, that Skepticism alone can produce it, and so on.¹⁰ This kind of apparent dogmatism appears throughout Sextus' writings, but it is always subject to generic caveats that Sextus spells out at loci such as PH i 4 and i 135; we are clearly to interpret these informal and superficially dogmatic statements as shorthand for official Skeptical statements. Thus 'Happy is the person who lives out his life in tranquility' (M xi 141) is to be translated into something like 'It seems to me now that tranquil people are happy (though I do not insist that this is true in the nature of things)'. So Sextus' critics are mistaken in accusing him of an inconsistency and dogmatism in connection with his aim of tranquility. For the reasons given, the surface of Sextus' writings tells us nothing of importance about any possible dogmatism infecting the Skeptic's goals—if there is something to worry over it must lie deeper.

¹⁰ See the uncritical presentation of such texts (mostly from M xi) in Nussbaum 1994, 302. She appears to take these texts to be in themselves indicative of dogmatism.

There remains, however, a different, somewhat subtler problem. Even if there is no inconsistency between the aim of tranquility *per se* and the texts we have been considering, there remains a problem involving the Skeptic's actually *possessing* that aim. To put it another way, if we clear the Skeptic of dogmatism by saying that he merely has the impression that tranquility is good, we are still left wondering why even that impression or appearance is not removed by the Skeptical techniques for opposing equipollent arguments so as to arrive at suspension of judgment and the standstill of the intellect (ἐποχή and στάσις διανοίας, PH i 10).

To explain this point it is necessary to observe two things about the Skeptic. First, he is in principle entitled to have an impression or take in appearances about anything whatever. This is guaranteed both by the general statement Sextus makes about Skeptics' accepting attitude toward 'anything which leads us, without our willing it, to assent in accordance with passive appearance' (PH i 19), and by his statement that Skeptics live 'in accordance with everyday observances (κατὰ τὴν βιωτικὴν τήρησιν)...consisting in guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise' (PH i 23). In these two ways, at least, any subject matter might in principle qualify for being the object of a Skeptical impression. The second point, however, is that Sextus in fact displays great enthusiasm for one or another position in some areas, whereas in others he seems rather to have no view at all—he simply suspends judgment and makes no mention of having an appearance. For instance, the Skeptic clearly has some sort of impression concerning things like the taste of honey (PH i 20), whether he is chilled (PH i 13), and whether there are numbers (PH iii 151). And in PH iii 2 Sextus even mentions that Skeptics are willing to say, in keeping with everyday practice (βίος), that God exists. In these cases, full awareness of the Modes and of specific Skeptical arguments directed against dogmatic beliefs does not prevent the Skeptic from retaining a certain way of seeing things. But other kinds of cases seem to be quite different. For instance, concerning proofs (PH ii 144ff.), causes (PH iii 29) and what is good or bad by nature (PH iii 235), Sextus says only that Skeptics suspend judgment.

Now why does the Skeptic have appearances of and voice strong feelings one way or another about certain subjects and not others? Perhaps it is not obvious what the answer to this question is. (It is true that Sextus tells us forthrightly in PH i 13 that what Skeptics particularly reject are only beliefs conceived of as 'unclear object of investigation in the sciences', but this only invites further questions about what exactly qualifies as such an unclear object, why numbers and gods do not qualify but causes do, and so on.¹¹) A plausible conjecture, however, is that the areas concerning which Sextus does not seem to have even an impression are those which fall into neither general category mentioned above: they are

¹¹ See Burnyeat 1997, 114f. for additional comments on too simple a reading of this passage in the present context.

neither the products of the involuntary workings of our minds and bodies (as impressions of taste and heat are) nor are they part of the fabric of our everyday, non-theoretical life that we absorb through custom and nature (as impressions about numbers and gods may be). On this interpretation, the reason Sextus will not end up with a view about causes and proofs is that such a view could only be the product of the kind of theoretical reasoning he sees no grounds for accepting. Yet, the practice of counting and the associated talk of numbers is firmly grounded in everyday life. So if this line of thought is right, a fundamental component of Skeptical practice consists in avoiding association with any view that is the product of unnecessary, theoretical reasoning (for which there cannot be any real basis, as the Skeptic thinks), and that is not simply a matter of preserving what custom and nature have instilled in us or what is forced on us without our willing it.¹²

With these observations in place, we can see the trouble with the Skeptic's adoption of a final end, and a highly specific and controversial one at that. Notice, first, that when Sextus uses the term *τέλος* in i 25-30, he does not give us his own or some general definition, but rather appeals to the standard, technical philosophical usage current at the time.¹³ This makes it obvious that he is not invoking some facet of ordinary life. And in any case, it is hardly plausible that the person in the street always acts so as to promote some 'final object of desire'. Few if any of us consistently act with some grand, global objective in mind; most of our actions occur in the context of limited, short-term goals (to win her affection, to get rid of thirst, to get a promotion). And there is no obvious, non-theoretical sense in which all of these goals are subsumed under some super-goal (none, that is, that is acceptable to a Skeptic).

So in adopting a final end, Sextus seems neither to be appealing to ordinary life, nor if he did would the appeal be credible. And it seems obvious that we are not compelled without our willing it to make out a final end toward which all we do aims (the way we feel compelled to believe that we are chilled). But this means that Sextus' views of the *τέλος* fall into neither category mentioned above as conditions for the Skeptic to have appearances. So why does he have them? Why are they not eliminated once all considerations in their favor have been destroyed by the Skeptical arguments? Why is the concept of a final end not subject to the same destructive methods that other standard philosophical concepts are in *PH* and elsewhere?

To appreciate the force of this problem we must be careful not to be lulled into thinking that because the Skeptic's aim is an appearance, not a dogmatic belief, there is no difficulty since the skeptical arguments are not designed to apply to appearances. The point is not that the Skeptic is not entitled to his impressions

about the *τέλος* because Skeptical arguments should have been applied to those impressions; it is rather that it is hard to understand how the Skeptic could have arrived at those impressions in the first place in the absence of dogmatic reasoning, and why they would have been retained once all the arguments in favor of the relevant views had been laid waste. And this worry is only amplified by the strange fact that Sextus never bothers introducing opposing arguments related to the final end.¹⁴ In other cases, we might simply appeal to the involuntary nature or everyday practical significance of the Skeptic's impressions, but as I have explained, that option is not open to us here. Nor is it plausible to suggest that Sextus' impressions are simply remainders left over from his career as a dogmatic philosopher. Why should this be the only such remainder? Why are there not similar leftovers in the cases of causation, proofs, and so on?

Perhaps the best way to make the point is to imagine that Sextus had dealt with other philosophical notions similarly. Suppose, for example, he had said that it seemed to him that the Epicurean theory of what is good by nature was the right one (though not as a matter of dogmatic belief), and that, moreover, he had failed to set up opposing arguments against the Epicurean views. Despite the fact that what was being described was merely an appearance, in such a case it seems to me that we would be faced with a puzzle, and the mere fact that it was an appearance that was involved would not settle anything. What would be troubling would be the unique avowal of an impression about an abstruse theoretical subject matter without any grounding in everyday life, and the failure to produce equipollent arguments that, in all other such cases, seem to destroy even appearances. For what could the appearance rest on once all considerations in its favor had been destroyed, if it had no foundation in habit, custom, or nature? The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for the Skeptic's aim.

4

We now have a clearer picture of what the real problem is with the Skeptic's possessing an aim. But before proceeding to consider what, if any, solution there might be to this problem, it may help to bring out its importance by emphasizing the *structural role* that the aim of tranquility seems to play for the Skeptic. One place this comes into focus is a passage mentioned earlier, where Sextus explains why Skeptics bother attempting to convince dogmatists to abandon their beliefs. He says, 'Skeptics are philanthropic and wish to cure by argument, as far as they can, the conceit and rashness of the Dogmatists' (*PH* iii 280), and he goes on to offer the medical analogy in which the Skeptic plays the role of the doctor curing the ailments of the dogmatist. The question we need to ask is why philanthropy should manifest itself in engaging dogmatists. Why not simply allow the conceited, rash dogmatist to go on his merry way? Since Sextus has already argued

¹² The contemptuous expressions 'invented [or: fabricated] by the dogmatists' (ὕψὸς τῶν δογματικῶν πελάσθηα, *PH* ii 102) and 'superfluities of the dogmatists' (τῶν δογματικῶν περιεργία, *PH* iii 151) are interesting in this respect. They suggest that what Sextus objects to is a sort of frivolous, unnecessary going beyond the views and assumptions we all share in ordinary life.

¹³ See the references given by Annas and Barnes 1994 in a note to this passage.

¹⁴ The closest Sextus comes to setting up opposed equipollent arguments about the *τέλος* is in considering accounts of what is good and bad by nature, *M* xi 42-109. But this is not very close; there is not discussion of tranquility or of aims as such.

at length that the problem with dogmatists is not that they embrace the wrong particular beliefs—these instead of those—but rather that they embrace any at all, the answer cannot be that Skeptics engage with dogmatists in order to help them avoid error, or to help them arrive at some particular set of beliefs. The reason that the Skeptic's philanthropy results in interacting with dogmatists seems rather to be that the Skeptic has the impression that doing so will cause the dogmatist to reach his, the Skeptic's, goal of tranquility. Presumably part of the point of the talk of philanthropy here is that philanthropists help others achieve the aims they themselves have, at least when it comes to global, overall aims. That, at any rate, is the only obvious way of connecting Sextus' remark about philanthropy with his fervor for refuting dogmatism. And in that case, the Skeptic's possession of his aim seems highly important to his interaction with others. For supposing the Skeptic had no aim at all, or an aim such as the Epicurean's, it is unclear what could motivate and guide the Skeptic's interaction with dogmatists, even granting his philanthropic impulses. If he agreed with the Epicurean goal of maximizing pleasure, his philanthropy might well manifest itself in leaving the dogmatist be, since that might well bring the dogmatist more pleasure (if less tranquility—pleasures can be disturbing). So one important structural role of the *τέλος* seems to be that it motivates and controls the Skeptic's (philosophical) interaction with others.

Even more important, however, is the role the aim of tranquility plays in the Skeptic's own life. As we noted earlier, the Skeptic has, by definition, the ability to deploy opposing equipollent arguments and so to arrive at a standstill of the intellect and then tranquility (*PH* i 8). But why should he wish to exercise this ability? This question assumes great importance if we reflect on the life of an actual Skeptic. Suppose he awakes one morning and finds himself in possession of the rash, conceited and dogmatic belief that $2+2=4$. Not just that it seems so to him, but that it is a fact about the world that $2+2=4$ and that if others should have contrary impressions they would be crazy or grossly mistaken. Sextus makes it elaborately clear *how* the Skeptic is to deal with this local invasion of dogmatism: it is to be suppressed by applying the complex dialectical machinery outlined in *PH* i, or the specific arguments described in detail elsewhere in *PH*, in *M*, and presumably elsewhere in books that do not survive. The mature Skeptic can perhaps count on these devices to repulse the troublesome dogmatic invasion. But Sextus has nothing to say about *why* he should apply these devices in the kind of case mentioned. Why should he not simply allow dogmatism to regain a foothold or even to recapture all of its territory? The answer that springs to mind is that this would be a return to the *καταστάσις* he recalls having escaped through the Skeptical procedures; he knows that he was tranquil when without beliefs, and fears losing that tranquility if he is once again in possession of dogmatic beliefs about which he will have doubts due to opposing arguments.¹⁵ If this is so, then the aim of tranquility plays a major role in the Skeptic's life, since it is

¹⁵ On these issues, see Barnes 1997, 89–91.

this aim that causes him to apply his Skeptical tools in the first place. If he did not value tranquility he would seem to lack any motivation for using any of the complex methods Sextus outlines.

This is important to bear in mind when considering the apparently provisional nature of the Skeptic's aim. Sextus introduces his aim with the words, '*Up to now we say the aim of the Skeptic is...*' (*PH* i 25), and goes on to emphasize the aim's origin in the Skeptic's past. This seems to allow that at any moment the Skeptic might adopt some other aim, and serves as another barrier to applying naïve dogmatic interpretations to what I have stressed are to be taken as carefully qualified non-committal avowals of impressions. Of course, this does little to explain the Skeptic's announcing the possession of an aim, however provisional. As I mentioned earlier, it would have been similarly puzzling of Sextus to announce that Skeptics endorse the Epicurean theory of what is good by nature, however cagey his wording was. But in light of the structural role that the Skeptic's aim plays in his way of life, we can now see that the more significant problem with playing up the officially provisional nature of the Skeptic's aim is that without that aim it is unclear what could motivate such crucial aspects of the Skeptic way as the interaction with dogmatists and the application of the Skeptical machinery against encroaching dogmatism. The Skeptic's aim may be provisional, but it also appears to be essential, for without it his way of life seems imperiled.

So we have a well-defined problem concerning the Skeptic's possession of a final end, one that cannot be removed by careful appeal to the Skeptical caveats and cautions about their occasionally loose use of speaking, and this problem goes to the core of the Skeptical way of life—it cannot be dismissed as incidental to Pyrrhonian practice. What to do?

One avenue to explore is Sextus' own account of how Skeptics hit upon tranquility. On this account, Skeptics arrive at that happy state quite fortuitously—*τυχεῖως*. In characterizing the Skeptical aim, Sextus tells us that,

Skeptics began to do philosophy in order to decide among appearances and to apprehend which are true and which false, so as to become tranquil (ὥστε ἀταρακτῆσται); but they came upon equipollent dispute, and being unable to decide this they suspended judgment. And when they suspended judgment, tranquility in matters of opinion followed fortuitously (*τυχεῖως*)... A story told of the painter Apelles applies to the Skeptics. They say that he was painting a horse and wanted to represent in his picture the lather on the horse's mouth; but he was so unsuccessful that he gave up, took the sponge on which he had been wiping off colors from his brush, and flung it at the picture. And when he hit the picture, it produced a representation of the horse's lather. Now the Skeptics were hoping to acquire tranquility by deciding the anomalies in what

appears and is thought of, and being unable to do this they suspended judgment. But when they suspended judgment, tranquility followed as it were fortuitously, as a shadow follows a body. (*PH* i 26, 28–30)

We might wish to reconsider the problem we have identified with the Skeptic's possession of his aim in light of this passage. When described in these terms, the Skeptic's aim does not appear to be something that is positively pursued, and is for that reason less conspicuous for its not having been eradicated. If achieving the Skeptic's end is a mere lucky concomitant of shaking off dogmatism, then it may be that concerns about it are overblown. I have already given reasons for supposing that the Skeptic's aim plays a much more important role in Skeptical practice than Sextus seems to let on here, but that does not absolve us from considering more carefully the claims made in this passage.

Sextus' account is confusing. To begin with, it is not obvious what relation Sextus' Skeptical biography is supposed to bear to his present aim of tranquility. Sextus seems to suppose that in explaining the process of actually arriving at tranquility he has explained why he now, as a confirmed Skeptic, still has the aim of tranquility. But an explanation of the one is not an explanation of the other. It may be that Sextus is merely offering incidental historical remarks to help flesh out our understanding of the Skeptic way, but if not—if he really is trying to explain the Skeptic's present *τέλος*—then it is hard to see how the biographical information he offers us is to the point.¹⁶ A story of how the Skeptic first arrived at tranquility is not an explanation of why tranquility is still an aim he pursues.

The Apelles anecdote, too, is difficult to make out. The main point is supposed to be that just as Apelles achieved his intended result by chance and after the standard methods had failed, so the Skeptic achieved his aim fortuitously and by way of the failure of dogmatism. But this too does not explain why the Skeptic *now* holds the aim of tranquility; in fact it seems deeply misleading in that respect. When the Skeptic was still a perplexed dogmatist, investigating opposed arguments, we could sensibly say of him that he happened on his aim by some chance method. But now that he is a confirmed Skeptic, deploying arguments in a deliberate pattern to achieve the goal of *ἀπραξία*, it no longer makes sense to speak of achieving that result by chance, and the analogy with Apelles seems inappropriate. The mature Skeptic has not only an end but a method for systematically achieving that end—setting up opposing arguments. The mature Skeptic resembles not the Apelles of the anecdote, but a later Apelles who systematically utilizes his sponge to achieve his artistic aim.

The question we are likely to be most interested in involves the mature Skeptic's possession of an aim, not the biographical fact that Skeptics started out looking for tranquility and then happened to find it by investigating opposed arguments. Sextus' point about the fortuitous nature of the Skeptic's route to his

pre-Skeptical end is of no value in dealing with that question. Before pressing on in that direction, however, it is worth noting some reasons Sextus might be interested in dwelling on Skeptical biography and *τύχη*. First, it is of great evangelistic value to be able to tell a prospective initiate that the Skeptic himself once was in the same position the prospective may well be in—seeking after happiness (that he might provisionally be willing to associate with tranquility) and troubled by opposing arguments. The prospective may be deciding between Stoicism or Epicureanism and Skepticism, and may be unsure as yet about what would come out of applying Skeptical methods. By assuring the prospective that he himself arrived at his Skepticism by rigorously pursuing the very aim the prospective has, the Skeptic can strengthen the appeal of his own way of life.¹⁷ Further, stressing the historical, biographical aspect of the Skeptic's aim allows him to sidestep the problem that I have been emphasizing. As I have argued, the aim of tranquility plays a role in Skepticism that is very difficult to explain. By getting us to concentrate on the role tranquility plays in the nascent stage of the Skeptic's development Sextus subtly directs our attention away from the strange importance tranquility has for the mature Skeptic. Finally, and in a similar vein, Sextus somewhat diminishes the significance of his aim by making its achievement seem the result of mere chance, which again causes us to worry about it less than we probably should. A goal that merely played a role long ago in the formative stage of the Skeptic's development and that is only reached by chance may seem sufficiently marginal to the Skeptic way to avoid attracting unwanted attention.¹⁸

It does not, then, seem adequate to reply to the criticism of the Skeptic's aim that we have developed that it was acquired while he was still a dogmatist and that its achievement under Skepticism was completely fortuitous; this leaves untouched the central issue of the Skeptic's continued pursuit of that aim in the course of employing his Skeptical techniques. There is, however, a different response. We could simply deny that the Skeptic's goal of tranquility is the *kind* of thing that is susceptible to the crushing Skeptical arguments Sextus gives us throughout his writings. These, we might insist, apply to dogmatic beliefs, and the Skeptic's aim does not qualify as such. Of course, when the Skeptic was still a dogmatist, his aim might have been held as a belief—the belief that it is good in the nature of things to achieve tranquility—but upon his conversion, the Skeptic comes to have that aim only as a residual *habit* or *disposition*. He spontaneously centers his own life and his interaction with others around the aim of tranquility, but not out of any theory or belief about tranquility. Perhaps we could compare the overall aim of tranquility to a lesser aim like prospering financially. A dog-

¹⁷ This agenda is suggested by the fact that Sextus refers in *PH* i 25 to definitions of the *τέλος* advanced by competing schools (esp. Stoics and Peripatetics—see references in notes 47 and 48 of Annas and Barnes 1994).

¹⁸ Notice also the subtle use of a *ῥῶστε* result clause in the beginning of *PH* i 26 instead, as we might suppose and as the English translations often lead us to expect, a *ἵνα* purpose clause. (Nussbaum 1994, 301 points this out.) This, too, gently steers us away from certain problems connected with the idea of a mature Skeptic pursuing a goal.

¹⁶ The use of *ῥῶπ* at the beginning of i 26 together with the content of the preceding sentences suggests the latter intent.

manist might have views about the value of wealth—that it really is better, other things equal, to be rich than poor—and so hold his aim as a matter of dogmatic belief. If the dogmatist then turns Skeptic, he might retain his orientation toward prosperity in everyday life by, e.g., taking into consideration price when making purchases, but only as a leftover habit for which he sees and needs no justification. Similarly, the goal of tranquility may survive only as a general disposition with no cognitive content for arguments to work on. Asking the Skeptic to reconsider this kind of orientation is, on this view, a kind of category mistake.

The trouble with this line is that it focuses on an irrelevant contrast, the contrast between a belief that Skeptical arguments can attack, and a habit or disposition that they supposedly cannot. This contrast is trivial, since any belief can be redescribed as a disposition. If I have a theory of causes or of proofs, I can always redescribe this as a disposition to go along with certain kinds of statements, to behave in a certain way, to have certain thoughts, and so on. The possibility of such a redescription, surely, cannot be critical to the issue at hand. The contrast that matters is rather the contrast between beliefs *or* habits *or* dispositions that are theoretical and those that are grounded in everyday day living or are involuntary. And, as I have already argued, the Skeptical aim is, in terms of this contrast, heavily theoretical. What needs arguing is not that aims can be given a non-cognitive interpretation, but that they can be explained in a way that retains their usefulness for Skeptical practice while making clear their grounding in everyday life or else their involuntary character. This is the kind of explanation that has eluded us. Even if the Skeptic merely has a disposition or habit spontaneously to affirm tranquility as his end in all matters, if that disposition can only be arrived at by theorizing and would be undermined by an appreciation of opposing views (views according to which either there is no final end or that end is not tranquility) then it cannot be consistent with Pyrrhonian practices as described in *PH*.

Our reflections thus far seem to indicate that in stating that the Skeptic has a *τέλος* and that the *τέλος* is *ἀταραξία*, Sextus is indicating allegiance to just the kind of philosophical theorizing he claims to have rejected. He can neither claim to be compelled by human nature to have this final end, nor can he claim that it is a part of ordinary life, nor even that it is uncontroversial among those who have thought about the subject—the very philosophers whose definition of *τέλος* he borrows reject it. The central problem, then, is not reconciling the aim of *ἀταραξία* with the rest of Skepticism, but reconciling the mature Skeptic's actually possessing that aim with the rest of his Skepticism. And of course the problem is exacerbated by what we have seen is the critical importance the Skeptic's *τέλος* plays in his way of life; it is not as if his aim is merely a residual but completely inert view left over from his days as a dogmatist. Sextus needs some kind of organizing principle for his Skeptic way, one that will explain why it is that Skeptics bother to deploy their dialectical machinery in the first place, both in respect to themselves and in respect to others. Without such an explanation, it will look as if Skepticism is just *νοήματα*—why go to the trouble of *αἴτιον* *ἀναίτιον*

have seen, with the *τέλος* on board, Sextus can give a fine answer to that question: Skepticism is the only way to achieve a certain compelling goal.

I do not have a solution to offer to the puzzle I have raised for the Skeptic, though the reasons for having some kind of organizing principle that I have sketched may explain the existence of the Skeptic's *τέλος* without providing any justification for it. Much effort has gone into convicting the Skeptic of some sort of epistemic inconsistency—of holding dogmatic beliefs despite protests to the contrary. Whether these efforts have been successful is up for debate. However, I have argued that the real failing of the Pyrrhonian Skeptic may lie not in his beliefs but in his aims.¹⁹

Department of Philosophy
Princeton University
Princeton NJ 08540

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Annas, Julia. 1993. *The Morality of Happiness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Annas, Julia and Jonathan Barnes trans. 1994. *Outlines of Scepticism*. Cambridge University Press.
Barnes, Jonathan. 1997. 'The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist' 58-91 in Burnyeat and Frede edd. 1997.
Bett, Richard trans. 1997. *Against the Ethicists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Burnyeat, Myles. 1983a. 'Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?' 117-148 in Burnyeat ed. 1983b.
Burnyeat, Myles ed. 1983b. *The Skeptical Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Burnyeat, Myles. 1997. 'The Sceptic in His Place and Time' 92-126 in Burnyeat and Frede edd. 1997.
Burnyeat, Myles and Michael Frede edd. 1997. *The Original Sceptics*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
Nussbaum, Martha. 1994. *The Therapy of Desire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Sedley, David. 1983. 'The Motivation of Greek Scepticism' 9-30 in Burnyeat ed. 1983b.
Striker, Gisela. 1990. 'Ataraxia: Happiness as Tranquility' *Monist* 73: 97-110.

¹⁹ A more comprehensive consideration of the Skeptic's final end would involve examining the choice of *ἀταραξία* in particular. Certainly the facts that it (unlike most other ancient conceptions of *εὐδαιμονία*) is purely psychological and that it is a privative state fit well with other aspects of Skepticism. On this point, see Striker 1990.