

Activity, Action, and Assent On the Life of the Pyrrhonian Sceptic

[Draft—comments are welcome! This paper is still in progress. Many footnotes with references to scholarly literature and to primary texts could be added.]

In this paper, I shall trace some of Sextus' responses to a famous anti-sceptical argument, the Apraxia Charge. This charge can be understood and formulated in a number of different ways. Sextus interprets it before he responds to it, and part of my discussion will be concerned with the intricacies of different ways of phrasing the issue, and with trying to identify the precise nature of the problem as Sextus addresses it.

In interpreting Sextus' construal of the problem, and his responses, I shall address two questions that have been key to scholarly debates. First, does the sceptic perform rational actions? Second, is the sceptic's life like the life of ordinary people?¹ As I shall argue, Sextus ultimately aims to show that the sceptic is *active*, not that he acts in the sense of

¹ Many of the most influential publications on the sceptics engage with these questions. The papers by Burnyeat, Frede, and Barnes that were eventually published as a book (*The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*, Hackett 1998), as well as papers by Richard Bett, Jacques Brunschwig, David Sedley, and Gisela Striker, have been the starting point of my research on the sceptics while I was still a student. I cannot acknowledge my debt to these articles at every point along the way. Richard Bett "Carneades' Pithanon: A Reappraisal of Its Role and Status," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 7 (1989): 59-94; David Sedley, "The Motivation of Greek Skepticism," in M. Burnyeat (ed.), *The Sceptical Tradition* (University of California Press, 1983): 9-29; G. Striker, "Sceptical Strategies," in J. Barnes and others (eds.), *Doubt and Dogmatism* (Oxford University Press, 1980): 54-83; repr. in G. Striker, *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1996): 92-115; G. Striker, 1990 "Ataraxia: Happiness as Tranquillity," *Monist* 73: 97-110. Two more recent papers which explore related issues are John Cooper, "Arcesilaus: Socratic and Sceptic," in his: *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good* (Princeton University Press, 2004): 81-103, and Gisela Striker, "Scepticism as a Kind of Philosophy," *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 83 (2001): 113-129.

dogmatic theories about rational agency. The Pyrrhonian sceptic can be active in many spheres of life. And we might view some of our actions as not unlike the actions of the sceptic, as Sextus portrays them. However, I shall also argue that we would only be prepared to view *some* of our actions in this way (and perhaps not even precisely in the way in which Sextus would account for them in the context of the sceptic's life). If we look at Pyrrhonian life as a whole, it seems deeply different from ordinary life. Not only is it characterized by the sceptic's investigative activities. Further, the sceptic views his actions in an uncommitted way that is untypical of an ordinary life—a life not shaped by the kinds of experiences that Pyrrhonian philosophizing supposedly generates.²

1. Suspension of judgment

In my introduction, I spoke of the Apraxia Charge, without offering even so much as an attempt at translating '*apraxia*', or explaining what the charge amounts to. In fact, I do not think that there is one way of describing the problem that would do justice to the many-faceted controversies between the ancient sceptics (of whom we shall only consider Sextus) and their opponents, whom the sceptics call dogmatists, i.e., most importantly the Stoics and Epicureans.³

² In this paper, I am returning in part to questions that I discuss in *Skepsis und Lebenspraxis: Das pyrrhonische Leben ohne Meinungen* (Freiburg, 1998) (in particular with respect to the notion of *phainomena*, sceptic speech, *doxa* and related notions, and the conceptions of forced and undogmatic assent).

³ In the scholarly literature on these matters, it is customary to fall in with the way in which the sceptics portray the philosophical landscape—as basically divided between sceptics and dogmatists (and negative dogmatists). It is also customary to note that the key opponents of the sceptics are the Stoics, and that therefore it is unproblematic to assume, at least for the most part, that we are discussing a series of Stoic-sceptic debates (i.e., controversies between various sceptics and Stoic philosophers). While I think that this is largely accurate, and while I will proceed on the assumption that Sextus is well

Here are some alternative ways of describing the Apraxia Charge:

- If the sceptic suspends judgment, he cannot act.
- If the sceptic does not assent, he cannot act.
- If the sceptic does not have any beliefs, he cannot act.

For the moment, I shall ignore the question of what “the sceptic cannot act” means; we will turn to that later. Let me first briefly address the other half of the above sentences.

Why would it matter which of these descriptions we choose?

Suppose that the first formulation is relatively unproblematic. Sextus clearly says about the sceptic that he suspends judgment. But since ‘suspension of judgment’ is a term of art of the sceptics, this formulation is also somewhat uninformative. Thus we might try and rephrase it. Should we say that, according to the dogmatists, one cannot act if one does not assent? As we shall see, Sextus allows for certain kinds of assent—forced assent and undogmatic assent—that fall short of assent as the Stoics define it. So it is not precisely

versed in the details of the relevant Stoic theories (as his many discussions in PH 2-3 and M make clear), it seems to me that the Epicureans play a larger role here than it is often assumed. For example, I think that the Epicureans are the main proponents of an anti-sceptical move that calls into question the sceptic ability to think, and therefore to investigate (see below). I hope to address other ways in which I consider Epicurean epistemology relevant to Sextus’ scepticism in another paper. A further note: throughout the paper, I am assuming (in agreement with widespread views) that much of Sextus’ discussions should be read as dialectically employing dogmatic views. When I say, “Sextus argues,” I do not mean to suggest that he argues for a claim or theory that he would endorse. Rather, the idea is that he is leading his dogmatic interlocutors to conclusions that they, given their own premises, might have to accept.

true that, in Sextus' description, the sceptic does not assent (even though, of course, Sextus would at many points use 'assent' in the dogmatic sense, and accordingly say that the sceptic does not assent).

Perhaps we should describe the problem by saying that, without *beliefs*, the sceptic cannot act. While this manner of speaking has the advantage of being readily comprehensible to us, it has the disadvantage of being potentially confusing with a view to a precise reconstruction of the issues. For the term 'belief' cannot be mapped onto any term in the philosophical vocabulary of the Stoics.

In the terms of the Stoics, human action involves assent to impressions, and in particular, to a hormetic (or practical) impression.⁴ For example, an agent who puts on her coat assents to the impression that 'to put on my coat is to be done' (and, more specifically, to the predicate 'to put on my coat'). This kind of impression is called 'hormetic' because assent to it is identified with impulse (*hormê*)—in assenting to a practical impression the agent creates the impulse to perform the respective action. If there is no external impediment, impulse sets off action. However, in deciding to put on her coat, the agent also assents to impressions on what is the case, for example, she assents to the impression that today it is snowing. Thus, human action typically involves several assents. The

⁴ See Brad Inwood, *Ethics and Human Action in Early Stoicism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985. Key texts are: Philo, *Allegories of the laws* 1.30 (SVF 2.844 = LS 53P); Stobaeus 2.86,17-87,6 (SVF 3.169, part = LS 53Q); Origen, *On principles* 3.1.2-3 (SVF 2.988, part = LS 53A); Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions* 1037F (SVF 3.175, part = LS 53R); Stobaeus 2.88,2-6 (SVF 3.171 = LS 33I); Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions* 1057A (SVF 3.177 part = LS 53S). I discuss my views on these issues in Chapter 4 of my forthcoming book *Law, Reason, and the Cosmic City* (Oxford, 2007).

Stoics, now, would not generically describe the respective states of holding something to be true as beliefs. They find it crucial to consider the overall condition of the agent's soul. If the agent is a fool, like almost everybody is, her assents are (and generate) opinions. The Stoics would thus say that her actions involve the holding of opinions. In the case of the perfect agent, every assent is identified with a piece of knowledge.⁵ For the Stoics, there is a key ethical component to the epistemological distinction between opinions and knowledge. The fact that the Stoics do not summarily refer to states of holding something to be true, but rather speak of opinions on the one hand, and pieces of knowledge on the other, is deliberate, and it would be obscured if we rephrased their theory as stating that beliefs figure in action.⁶

However, since we are ultimately concerned with the sceptics, we might think that the Stoic way of phrasing things can legitimately recede into the background. Does not Sextus talk about the sceptic as not holding beliefs? He does, but not in the precise sense

⁵ Key passages are: Cicero, *Academica* 2.145 (SVF 1.66 = LS 41A); SE M 7.152 (LS 41C); Stobaeus 2.73,16–74,e (SVF 3.112, part = LS 41H); Stobaeus 2.111,18–21 (SVF 3.548 = LS 41G). On opinion, see Constance Meinwald, “Ignorance and Opinion in Stoic Epistemology,” *Phronesis* 50 (2005): 215–231.

⁶ Insofar as we think that Sextus also has Epicurean epistemology in mind, we should note that different considerations apply here. Epicurean epistemology does not associate opinions with vice. However, I think it is probably justified to focus on the sceptic-Stoic debates in this context. The Socratic intuition that our ideas on how to live might turn out to be wrong, and therefore must be investigated, and replaced by knowledge, seems key to how Sextus describes the beginnings of scepticism (PH 1.27). Arguably, sceptic philosophy grows out of the Platonic and Socratic concern with opinions (*doxai*) as something that is ethically worrisome. For the Stoics, opinions are not just less reliable, or in some other epistemic sense inferior to knowledge. We should not have opinions in our lives—opinions are the mark of foolishness and vice. I suspect that, if only through the Pyrrhonian's pre-sceptical motivations, scepticism is to some extent wedded to the idea that opinions are bad for us. This, however, would be a different topic and I cannot provide the necessary arguments here.

that we would need here. Most of the time he talks about *dogmata*, not about *doxai*.⁷ Now we might think that the obvious reason for this is that the sceptic actually has beliefs—the only thing he does not have are dogmatic beliefs, or doctrines. I shall not enter into the long-standing debate on this issue. However, it is by now clear that, at the very least, this cannot be all that needs to be said here. For it does seem that the expressions ‘suspending judgment’, ‘not assenting’, and ‘not dogmatizing’ at least in some contexts amount roughly to the same. As far they do, ‘not dogmatizing’ is not obviously restricted to the realm of scientific or philosophical claims.⁸

But why does Sextus not say that the sceptic has no *doxai*? In part, I think, this must be explained by the fact that he and his predecessors are interlocutors of the Stoics (even if a particular sceptic might actually not encounter a Stoic opponent, but only view Stoicism as the prevailing dogmatic theory to engage with). If the sceptic said, “I do not have opinions,” he might in effect characterize himself as a wise person in the terms of the

⁷ Sextus says that the sceptic suspends judgment (*epechein*), that he does not assent (*sunkatathêsthai*), and that he does not dogmatize (*dogmatizein*). Further, Sextus uses *adoxastôs*, but only in PH, not in M.

⁸ Gisela Striker notes that the question of whether the sceptic holds beliefs, and whether Pyrrhonian appearances should count as beliefs, to some extent depends on how we choose to understand the term ‘belief’ (and might thus reduce to a terminological issue). She further suggests that the kinds of beliefs that one might rightly ascribe to the Pyrrhonian sceptic are of such a kind as to account for what she calls behavior. “If I avoid an approaching car, for example, I thereby show that I believe that there is a dangerous heavy object coming towards me that might kill me if I do not get out of the way. I could no doubt offer reasons, both for the belief and for the action, but I probably did not think of them. In fact my dog might have reacted in exactly the same way, though it cannot offer reasons to justify its ‘belief’. I would say that the Pyrrhonist conception of “following appearances” is on the model of this kind of behavior, and it is a matter of terminological choice whether we want to speak of belief here or not.” (2001, 119) While I won’t use the term in this way here, it is compatible with the interpretation that I defend in this paper to ascribe beliefs in such a weak sense to the sceptic.

Stoics. In the context of the Hellenistic debates, this description would leave it open whether the sceptic might actually have knowledge. In order to describe the sceptic as not having opinions or knowledge, a different phrase must be found. And this different phrase is, in Sextus, that the sceptic does not dogmatize (or at least this is one of Sextus' phrases).

Surely, Sextus could also have chosen some other word. For while the Stoics do not have a term of art that summarily refers to opinions and pieces of knowledge, they seem to sometimes use '*hypolêpsis*', so as to be able to refer generally to cases of someone holding something to be true.⁹ Why would the sceptics not employ this or a similar term? I think that, rather than trying to determine whether Sextus consistently only removes scientific beliefs from the sceptic life (rather than also everyday beliefs), we might think that, in some contexts, Sextus focuses on the idea that the sceptic does not have the answers to any of the questions that he initially (before turning into a sceptic) hoped to find. These were questions about the good and the bad, and on how one should be living. Answers to them surely would count as 'teachings', and thus as *dogmata*. However, for many contexts of Sextus' discussions, we cannot assume that suspension of judgment is restricted to philosophical matters. Clearly, when Sextus explains how the sceptic can eat and drink, he does not assume that the sceptic will anyway have beliefs on such everyday

⁹ See Stobaeus 2.111,18-112,8 (SVF 3.548, part = LS 41G): opinion is weak 'supposition' (*hypolêpsis*)—this usage might be taken to imply that there is a broader category, supposition, and opinion is one kind of it. However, this should be taken with some caution. The Stoics steer around this way of phrasing things as much as they can; it is important to their theory that opinion and knowledge are two deeply different cognitive acts (insofar as we consider the assenting as an act) and states (insofar as we consider the state that is generated in the soul).

issues. If the sceptic had such beliefs, the idea that he might be strictly immobile would not come up.

Without settling these issues, we can respond to these difficulties by returning to my first formulation: the sceptic suspends judgment. But, having gone through some of the ways in which the objection could be phrased, we might also want to allow for the other formulations—with certain provisos, and perhaps only in certain contexts of discussion.

2. *Activity and Action*

Let me turn to the charge that the sceptic “cannot act”. Does this mean that he is inactive (in the sense of immobile)? Or that his life does not contain the activities that are typical for a human life? Or that he cannot act in the sense in which the dogmatists think of rational human agency? As I shall suggest, Sextus portrays the problem in the first and second of these three ways, and takes himself to respond to these two objections. He aims to show that the sceptic is not inactive, and that the sceptic’s life consists of the activities that typically belong to a human life.

The best-known passage in which the term ‘*apraxia*’ is used against a sceptic—a passage in Plutarch—charges the sceptic with lack of action, where ‘action’ is used in the robust sense of what counts as the action of rational beings (of the kind that human beings are). Plutarch discusses Arcesilaus’ scepticism. Arcesilaus engages with the three movements of the mind that figure in Stoic theory of action—impression, assent, and impulse. The Stoic *scala naturae* proceeds by detailing how different kinds of entities *move*. Things

like stones need to be carried around; they are moved from the outside. Plants move out of themselves when they grow. Animals have impulses that are generated by impressions.

In human beings, however, there is no impulse without assent to impressions.¹⁰

Arcesilaus presumably argues (and it shall not concern us at this point what his precise argument is) that the sceptic's impulse is generated without assent. For the actions of his sceptic, two rather than three movements of the mind are enough: impression and impulse. In the terms of his Stoic opponents, the Academic sceptic thus opts for a kind of action that is typical for animals, not for human beings.

But having finally confronted it [i.e., suspension of judgment] from the Stoic with 'inactivity' (*apraxia*) like a Gorgon, they faded away, since for all their twisting and turning, impulse refused to become assent, and did not accept sensation as tipping the balance, ... (Plutarch, Col. 1122a = LS 69A, tr. LS)

Sextus does not use the term *apraxia*. He describes the problem about sceptic action most prominently in two passages, M 11.162-166 and PH 1.21-24.¹¹ In both of these passages, he is careful to present the charge *not* as the claim that the sceptic cannot *act*. Rather, he

¹⁰ Origen, *On principles* 3.1.2–3 (SVF 2.988, part = LS 53A).

¹¹ In this paper, I shall not side with one way of construing the relative chronology of Sextus' work. In recent times, Emidio Spinelli is most prominent in following Janacek, and arguing that PH is earlier than M. Richard Bett argues against this, and views PH as a philosophical improvement on M. I tend to agree with Richard Bett, but I keep an open mind. While it seems much more likely that a thinker comes to see problems, and develops strategies of steering around them (which might be an account of the development from M to PH), it is perhaps not impossible that Sextus comes to adopt a quite different approach to scepticism late in his life. A further reason for keeping an open mind is that I have come to view both PH and M as each containing 'layers', or passages that slightly differ in their outlook from each other. I therefore tend to think in terms of several strategies that Sextus has on a given issue, and to leave it open how many precisely that will be, and how they should be viewed chronologically. One might even have to read PH 1 selectively, setting the differences between the sets of tropes aside and focusing on the general outline of scepticism, in order to arrive at a consistent picture of what Sextus says in this one book.

presents it as the charge that the sceptic cannot *be active*. According to Sextus, the dogmatist says that the sceptic falls into *anenergêsia*, inactivity. Alternatively, the dogmatist says, the sceptic is inconsistent—that is, he assents even though he professes not to—and that is why we see him doing all kinds of things rather than being reduced to a plant. *Anenergêsia*, it seems, might be a different matter from *apraxia*. *Apraxia* could plausibly be understood as the lack of human action, or rational action. But when Sextus phrases the issue in terms of *anenergêsia*, he seems to have something else in mind. He wants to show that the sceptic is mobile rather than immobile, and that the sceptic life contains all the activities that typically constitute a human life.

PH 1.21-24 and M 11.162-166 also coincide in another important respect. In neither of these passages (nor anywhere else) does Sextus even mention the Stoic notion of impulse (*hormê*). He does not discuss the problem in terms of three Stoic movements of the mind—impression, assent, and impulse. He really only allows for impressions (or states, attitudes, and movements that can be explained in terms of impressions) when explaining sceptic action. The Stoic critic could thus say to him that, without impulse, his actions are not even like the actions of an animal. If the sceptic allows for only one movement of the mind, impression, then he should not be moving at all. This seems to be precisely what Sextus takes the objection to amount to, that the sceptic is immobile.

These two commonalities between PH 1.21-24 and M 11.162-166 are of key importance to the question of whether Sextus aims to present the sceptic as a rational agent. Given the vexed problem of what being a rational agent amounts to, I shall here only ask this

question in a limited sense. Does Sextus aim to show to his dogmatic interlocutors that the sceptic is a rational agent in *their* sense? Note that it need not be precisely their sense. The sceptic's arguments might amount to something like the idea that the sceptic acts for reasons, or that he does what he does after a process of reasoning about it. This might be enough for claiming that the dogmatists should view Pyrrhonian action as rational.

But Sextus' sceptic is not a rational agent in this sense. His action does not involve 'investigating' alternative courses of action. Sextus does not describe the sceptic as thinking about various courses of action, not being able to decide which one is better, and then performing some action based on a cognitive act that falls short of determining what one considers the appropriate thing to do. The minimal sense in which his sceptic 'thinks about' his actions is that he has impressions that guide his actions. Further, he must be, as it were, a competent user of the language and a human being who gets along in the world—he must have the kind of 'knowledge' (even though he would not call it that) that is required for that. The actions of Sextus' sceptic will involve such cognitive activities as perceiving an apple as an apple, or being aware that this rather than that looks like the street to the one's house; and his investigative activities involve thought. But the sceptic as Sextus portrays him does not consider alternative courses of action, and he does not take himself to be acting based on his practical reasoning.¹²

¹² Cooper compares Arcesilaus and Sextus, and argues (with a view to the investigation of theoretical questions) that Arcesilaus is committed to an ideal of reason in the Socratic sense. "So he is committed to a certain idea and ideal of reason—Socrates'—to violate which, he thinks, would be something really awful. [...] he will suspend for just so long as reason does demand it (because there are equally weighty considerations on both sides of the question)." "Arcesilaus's skepticism is the expression of his Socratic commitment

3. *Different Aspects of the Apraxia Charge*

For further discussion of Sextus' response to the Apraxia Charge, it will be helpful if we introduce a distinction between different aspects of this charge, as it has been leveled against the sceptics, and as they have interpreted it.

(i) *Self-Destruction Charge*: Suspension of judgment leads to self-destruction.

(ii) *Eudaimonist Charge*: The sceptic cannot live a good life.

(iii) *Plant Charge*: The sceptic is reduced to complete, i.e., plant-like, inactivity.

(iv) *Inconsistency Charge*: No matter what the sceptic professes, he at least sometimes assents (in the dogmatist's sense).

(v) *Paralysis Charge*: Without a practical criterion, the sceptic may (*per impossibile*) perform several, mutually incompatible actions at the same time.

(vi) *Animal Charge*: Action without assent (in the dogmatist's sense) is not the action of a rational being; at best it is the behavior of a non-rational animal.

A few (selective) notes on each of these charges. The Self-Destruction Charge is central to our testimony on Pyrrho, the namesake and presumably the forefather of Sextus' scepticism. This charge does not figure in the way in which Sextus describes the dogmatic objection. However, it does seem to figure in Sextus' account of the Pyrrhonian life, or, the least we should say is that it is covered by Sextus' account. Suspension of judgment could appear to be self-destructive in two ways. First, insofar as the sceptic

to living according to reason as our life's guide; Sextus's is the expression of a complete renunciation of reason altogether." (2004, 98 and 103).

might lack all reaction to sensory impressions (thus, for example, being run over by a car); second, insofar as one might lack all response to pleasures and pains, and thus fail to eat, drink, sleep, and so on, which would soon lead to death. Sextus aims to take care of both of these problems.

The aspect of the charge that I call the Eudaimonist Charge is particularly difficult, in part because PH and M differ greatly in this respect, and I will not be able to discuss these issues in this paper. (One way of thinking about Sextus' scepticism in PH 1 might be this. For someone who is initially worried by philosophical questions, a life of continued investigation, leading to the kind of quietude which exploring the issues from all sides, and arriving at suspension of judgment on them provides, can plausibly be a good life. This is compatible with this kind of life being wholly unattractive for someone who did not worry about the truth of things in the first place.)

Let me turn to the Plant Charge. The metaphor is suggestive, and perhaps it is in part for this reason that discussion of sceptic action in terms of whether the sceptic is reduced to a plant is so prominent in the texts. The Stoics, I think, would not have coined this comparison, for they discuss the fact that plants *move* (their movement of growth) in the direct context of the theory of action.¹³ For them, plants are not the metaphorical image of immobility. Plants have a soul, which is their source of movement. But the point of the Plant Charge (at least in Sextus' presentation of it), does not seem to be that a sceptic's soul would have the composition of a plant's soul, lacking the cognitive powers of

¹³ Origen, *On principles* 3.1.2–3 (SVF 2.988, part = LS 53A).

humans and animals. In order to appreciate the point of the Plant Charge, I guess we are to neglect the fact that plants in fact do move. Rather, we are to think of plants as arrested at one spot, unable to go here or there, and so on.¹⁴

The Inconsistency Charge assumes that *de facto* the sceptic is doing all kinds of things. If that is so, so the argument, then he assents, even though he says that he does not. And this means that he is being inconsistent. So there is a sense in which the Plant Charge and the Inconsistency Charge go hand in hand. Either the sceptic assents or he does not. If he does, he is inconsistent. If not, he is reduced to a plant.

However, the Paralysis Charge also is a counterpart of the Plant Charge. The Plant Charge supposes that, without assent, nothing happens—the sceptic is going to be as immobile as a plant. But now suppose that, against this, the sceptic says, “No, I can be active, I’m following appearances.” His critic will likely respond by saying that there are simply too many appearances for this to work out. The Paralysis Charge can be seen to arise from Hellenistic discussions of the criterion. It proposes that, if one does not have a practical criterion, one is not going to be able to *discriminate* with respect to impressions in such a way as to perform one particular course of action at the time.

¹⁴ It is perhaps in part for this reason that one might prefer the translation ‘vegetable’, rather than plant. For it invokes a bean or piece of broccoli, and leaves it open whether we even are to think of it as still in the process of growing, or rather as being already harvested. As Richard Bett says, the claim that the sceptic ‘stands fixed’ (*epeichen*) makes fun of sceptic suspension of judgment (*epochê*) (*Sextus Empiricus: Against the Ethicists*, Oxford 1997, p.174).

Note that the concept of a practical criterion derives much of its importance to Hellenistic debates from discussions about scepticism. The Stoics do not lay out their ethics by, first of all, claiming that their criterion is a cognitive impression of what is appropriate to do in a given situation.¹⁵ But if they were to present their theory with a view to the question of what their practical criterion is, this is probably what they would have to say (for they say that, in assenting to a practical impression, we assent to the impression that such-and-such is to be done, or appropriate to do).¹⁶ However, it is a prominent feature of sceptic replies to the Apraxia Charge that the sceptic explains *his* practical criterion. It is as much a problem for the sceptic to explain how he *can do anything at all*, as it is a problem to explain how he can perform *one particular action*. Why that action, the dogmatist would ask, and not another? In response to this, the sceptic needs to offer what is called a practical criterion—some explanation for why he does this rather than that.

The last charge, which I call the Animal Charge, admits that a sceptic may do something, and that he may do one thing rather than something else. It is thus independent from the Plant Charge, the Inconsistency Charge, and the Paralysis Charge—for neither does it view the sceptic as an immobile plant, nor as inconsistently assenting to impressions, nor

¹⁵ These issues are difficult. There has been much scholarly disagreement on the precise chronology of the various moves in the Stoic-Academic debates about the criterion on theoretical contexts, i.e., the Stoic claim that the cognitive impression is the criterion of truth, the sceptical attacks on this conception, and what looks like various Stoic refinements of their theory in response to sceptic arguments. While it is a key feature of Stoicism that epistemology is phrased in terms of identifying the criterion, it does not seem that Stoic ethics and theory of action is framed primarily as a response to the question “what is the criterion?”

¹⁶ Stobaeus 2.86, 17–18. It is a controversial question whether there are cognitive hormetic impressions. If we focus on the Stoic claim that the wise person only assents to cognitive impressions, it would seem that there have to be such impressions.

as paralyzed by being propelled into mutually exclusive courses of action. The Animal Charge calls into question whether the sceptic's action can count as human action, or more precisely, as action that is rational in the way in which human action is rational.

Sextus responds to the first five Charges. But he does not seem to consider it relevant to the explanation of Pyrrhonism to respond to the Animal Charge. As we have noted, he does not attempt to show that sceptics have 'human impulses' (i.e., rational impulses), which generate the bodily movement of action. But this, it would seem, is key to the dogmatic account of rational agency—that there is a *rational* movement of the mind that generates the motion, and that this rational movement is set off by a cognitive act of decision-making or arriving at a view on what should be done.

However, Sextus at the same time does not portray the sceptic as a being deprived of the typical human cognitive capacities. In fact, he begins his account of sceptic action in PH 1 by saying that the sceptic can think and perceive through the guidance of nature. These cognitive capacities are key to explaining the sceptic's life. But interestingly, Sextus does not add a third and fourth cognitive capacity, one that would capture the cognitive act of assenting or making judgments, and one that would explain how thought generates bodily motion. The sceptic needs to be able to perceive and to think, but he does not need to be able to decide what he should be doing, thereby generating his movements—this, I

suggest, is a very rough sketch of how Sextus would describe the role of reason in Pyrrhonian life.¹⁷

4. *M11: Preconceptions*

The two passages in which Sextus discusses the Apraxia Charge differ perhaps most importantly insofar as, in PH 1, the sceptic's actions are explained in terms of adherence to *appearances*, while in M 11, they are explained in terms of guidance through *preconceptions*. Further, the discussion is framed differently. In PH 1.21-24, Sextus aims to show what kind of *criterion* the Pyrrhonist has, an issue that is not explicitly addressed in M 11.162-166. M 11.162-166 is part of a chapter on the Pyrrhonist's end, which, again, is not the issue in PH 1.21-24.¹⁸

Before we turn to PH 1, let us first look at M 11.162-166. Sextus begins with his account of the dogmatic objection. According to the critics whom Sextus cites, the sceptic is either confined to inactivity (*anenergêsia*) or to inconsistency. All of life, Sextus says (citing a dogmatic view) consists of choices and avoidances. The sceptic, according to his critics, is confined to inactivity because not desiring one thing and avoiding another is virtually to reject life, and to be reduced to a plant (see also PH 1.226-7). He is confined to inconsistency because, if faced with a tyrant's command to do something unspeakable, each available option—choosing voluntary death for non-compliance, or going along

¹⁷ Cf. Striker (2001, 120 n.7): “There can be no question, of course, that the Pyrrhonists made use of reasoning in their arguments against other philosophers, but I think they kept it out of their sceptical way of living.”

¹⁸ In this chapter (M 11.141-167), Sextus seems to dialectically employ a number of Epicurean intuitions. There is no direct parallel to this in PH 1 (other than, to some extent, PH 1.25-30).

with the command—is a deliberate choice, i.e., a choice which, according to the anti-sceptical argument, involves assent to the impression that *this* (accepting the penalty of death, doing the unspeakable deed) is what one should be doing.

While Sextus only mentions two charges—inactivity and inconsistency—we might say that the way he describes the Inconsistency Charge also addresses what I call the Paralysis Charge. For Sextus does not merely say that, according to the dogmatists, the sceptic's activities suggest that in fact he assents to impressions. Sextus focuses on *choice*: the sceptic prefers one course of action to another, and that is what, to the dogmatist, suggests that he is inconsistent. I.e., the dogmatist not only says that the sceptic must assent in order to do something. He also says that the sceptic cannot simply assent to any number of impressions; assenting to one must go hand in hand with rejecting another. Even though the notion of a criterion does not come up in M 11, this is the idea that one needs a criterion of action.

Sextus' refutation of the dogmatic charges is this. The sceptic is inactive, he says, as far as leading one's life in accordance with a philosophical theory would be concerned. But those who put forward the charge, he says, do not understand that the sceptic adheres to a non-philosophical way of life, and that by doing so, he in fact is able to choose one thing and avoid the other (M 11.165). So far, Sextus' refutation sounds as if the sceptic sided with the way normal people live, in contradistinction to some overly academic life-style, where every action would be based on a philosophical account of what is to be done.

But interestingly, Sextus continues by giving a rather extreme example. He does not illustrate the sceptic's non-philosophical way of life by talking about the ways in which the sceptic can eat this rather than that, or wear a coat when it is cold. Rather, he says that choice and avoidance in the sceptic's life is a product of chance (*tychon*), and illustrates this through a quite extreme choice: the sceptic either accepts death penalty or does an unspeakable deed that a tyrant wants him to do.¹⁹ Sextus goes on to elaborate in which sense the sceptic's choice is by chance. His actions are not random in the sense that he just happens to go along with one rather than the other impression. Rather, his actions are random in the sense that it just happens to be the case that he was raised and trained in this way rather than in that way. Sextus says that the sceptic will act on the basis of his preconception (*prolēpsis*), which is in accordance with the laws and customs he has been brought up with. This is an interesting aspect of the passage in M 11 —there is no mentioning of preconceptions in PH I, and indeed, no significant mentioning of them in all of PH. Note that reference to preconceptions might explain a wide range of human action. If preconceptions are the early notions we acquire on growing up, they are likely to cover many evaluative and normative aspects of our life. I shall return to this point later.

When complying with the tyrant's demands, or resisting him in what looks like bravery, the sceptic will adhere to the ideas his parents raised him with; and it is a matter of chance what these ideas are. The sceptic thus is able to discriminate, and to perform one rather than the other action. And, in case he accepts death penalty, he will suffer less than

¹⁹ Cf. Bett (1997, 174-179), who argues that Sextus portrays sceptic action as rather different from the way in which ordinary people act.

the dogmatist, for he does not think that the punishment he suffers is a terrible thing (M 11.166).²⁰ Why would Sextus use this example, rather than a more mundane one? The sceptic's opponents might think that especially in such an extreme situation, we really need to make up our minds on what we should be doing. One does not find oneself sacrificing one's life, so the suggestion, as one might find oneself putting on a coat before leaving the house. Sextus thus seems to choose a case where our intuitions are particularly on the side of the dogmatists. However, his strategy might be deceptive. For in fact, these hard cases might actually be the cases that lend themselves *more*, rather than less, to the idea that our actions might be based on preconceptions. Perhaps it would be true to say that, in such an extreme situation, where one might feel that there is no good option, one's thoughts arrive at a dead end, and ultimately one will 'do what one will do'—and that may have a lot to do with ideas one acquired early on in life. But note that, while we might have this reaction on reading the text, it really involves a misconstrual of Sextus' account of sceptic action. Sextus' sceptic does not 'fall back on' custom and early education because he simply cannot figure out what he should be doing. Presumably, he goes along with the customary notions *without* any such prior struggle. This surely is not how ordinary people would face the choice of doing an unspeakable deed, or being put to death for non-compliance.

²⁰ This distinction between impression and judgment might (dialectically) rely on the Epicurean view that opinions are the judgments that we form on the basis of our impressions; falsity can come with judgment, not with the actual impression (SE, M 7.210). With a view to PH 1, I think that this distinction is relevant to Sextus' presentation of the sceptic's *metriopatheia*—the sceptic suffers, e.g., pain, but he does not add the judgment that pain is bad (PH 1.29-30). Of course, the Stoics also distinguish between impression and assent. But in the context of the Pyrrhonist's end, Sextus' wording seems closer to the Epicurean way of drawing the relevant distinction.

5. *PH I: Appearances as criteria*

In PH 1.21-24, the key passage on our topic in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus mentions the charge of inactivity (*Plant Charge*), but not the *Inconsistency Charge*. Here, he says that the sceptic needs a *criterion* according to which he can perform some actions and abstain from others. I take this remark to indicate that Sextus addresses what I call the *Paralysis Charge*—the problem how the sceptic can discriminate between various alternative actions, so as to perform one particular action, rather than being propelled into performing several actions at once.

The practical criterion of Pyrrhonism, according to Sextus, is ‘that which appears’ (*to phainomenon*); the sceptic adheres to appearances (*phainomena*) (PH 1.21-2). But how can adherence to appearances make the sceptic perform some actions, and not others? Would it not seem, in particular from the sceptic’s *own* point of view, that there are regularly several conflicting appearances? The attempt to act on all of them would indeed seem paralyzing. Let us look more closely at Sextus’ explanation, and at the Pyrrhonian notion of appearances.

The term ‘appearances’ is at the center of Pyrrhonian scepticism, and probably already played an important role in Pyrrho’s response to the Apraxia Challenge.²¹ Sextus speaks of appearances in a number of related, but different ways. Let us briefly look at two of them, which help us see an important point about the scope of this notion in PH 1.21-24.

(i) In PH 1.8-9, Sextus defines scepticism as the ability to put things into opposition:

²¹ R. Bett, *Pyrrho*, Chapter 2, esp. 92-3.

thoughts with thoughts, appearances (*phainomena*) with appearances, and thoughts with appearances. At this point, Sextus takes ‘*phainomena*’ to refer to perceptible things (*aisthêta*).²² (ii) When explaining the sceptic’s mode of speech, Sextus takes care to use the cognate verb, *phainesthai* (to appear), elliptically: ‘A now appears F to me [the sceptic]’ (rather than: ‘A now appears to be F to me’).²³ He says that an appearance is an affection (*pathos*) of the sceptic, something he passively undergoes (PH 1.15). Here, ‘appearance’ need not be limited to cases of perceptual appearing. An argument could appear to be invalid, etc. It is this broad way of using ‘to appear’ and ‘appearance’ which matters to sceptic action. I.e., the sceptic’s adherence to appearances is not exclusively an adherence to the appearances of perception and sensation, such as that a car is approaching, or that one is hungry. Any case of something appearing so-and-so counts as an appearance.

In his account of sceptic action, Sextus defines the term *phainomenon* as coextensive with the term ‘impression’ (*phantasia*), saying that an impression is an involuntary affection (*pathos*) and therefore not open to question (PH 1.22). That is, Sextus here focuses on one specific aspect of dogmatic thought about impressions. Sextus relies on

²² As I argue elsewhere, this contrast is somewhat weakened by the way in which Sextus illustrates the Tenth Trope. For there he seems to say that customs and ordinary life can be appearances, which are in conflict with theoretical ideas on how one should be living (2007, Chapter 1).

²³ This is an issue that I discuss in detail in 1998, Chapter 2. As I argue, it is of key importance to the interpretation of PH that Sextus never (and that covers very many instances) says that A appears *to be* F to the sceptic. Rather, he very carefully sticks to the elliptical formulation that A appears F to the sceptic. I argue that this is a Pyrrhonian misuse (in a certain sense) of the language, a specifically designed way of reporting appearances.

the intuition that there is a key passive element to impressions as the dogmatists conceive of them, and says that appearances are such impressions.²⁴

Sextus' account of the sceptic's adherence to appearances depends on a wide conception of appearances, a conception that includes sensory, non-sensory, and practical impressions. However, Sextus also needs to narrow down the notion of appearances that he uses when explaining the sceptic's criterion—otherwise, appearances would simply not be a practical *criterion*, i.e., something according to which some actions are performed, and other actions are *not* performed. He does so by tying the notion of appearances to the notion of ordinary life. The sceptic does not follow all appearances. He follows the appearances of ordinary life. The way in which appearances provide the sceptic with a criterion is fourfold.

Thus, adhering to the appearances, we live in accordance with the ordinary ways of life, without thereby holding opinions (*adoxastôs*)—for we are not able to be utterly inactive. These ordinary ways of life seem to be fourfold, and to consist in guidance by nature, necessitation by affections, the handing down of laws and customs, and instruction in expertises. By nature's guidance we are naturally capable of perceiving and thinking. By the necessitation of affections, hunger conducts us to food and thirst to drink. By the handing down of customs and laws, we regard in a practical, everyday kind of way piety as good and impiety as bad. Through instruction in skills we are not inactive in those kinds of crafts that we adopt. (PH 1.23-4, tr. Annas/ Barnes with modifications)

²⁴ The Stoics say that an impression is like an imprint or alteration in the soul. An impression is a *pathos* in the soul. However, they would also say that a visual impression is generated in the soul through vision, and vision is one of the capacities of the soul. So for them, this passivity would only be one part of the story. Aetius 4.12.1-5 (SVF 2.54, part = LS 39B). Similarly, Epicureans would distinguish between sensory impressions on the one hand, and our active attention to them on the other.

Adherence to appearances is here explained as adherence to the normal ways of life—to the ways in which life happens to be lived in the communities that the sceptic is part of. The notion of appearances is thus importantly narrowed down. Not every impression guides the sceptic's actions. Rather, only those impressions that go along with an ordinary way of leading one's life do so. Thus appearances can do the work of a practical criterion. But what precisely does adherence to appearances, as Sextus describes it here, amount to?

6. Forced and undogmatic assent

In PH 1.23, Sextus speaks of the sceptics as 'adhering' (*prosechontes*) to appearances. This might suggest that we should seek the key to his position (or part of it) in this very term—in the idea of adhering. Perhaps adhering to appearances, or following appearances, is different from accepting appearances? Especially since Academic sceptics seem to have employed similar terms, and seem to have used them to describe the sceptic's attitude as compared to assent, it may seem that we are here dealing with the same kind of move. If so, Sextus would be claiming that the sceptic follows appearances, rather than accepting them, or assenting to them. And surely, this seems to be Sextus' strategy at a number of places. For example, Sextus explains that 'being persuaded' (*peithesthai*) is used in two ways, and explains that the sceptic's way of believing something, or coming to be persuaded by it, is something like 'letting oneself be led without offering opposition' (PH 1.230). In general, it seems to me that in all contexts that discuss belief, rather than action, Sextus chooses this kind of language. One of the most noteworthy features of the famous passage I.13—the passage which has been key to

scholarly controversies on whether the sceptic has beliefs of any kind—seems to be that Sextus admits to a certain kind of assent, but does so in a practical context.

When we say that the sceptic does not dogmatize we do not use the term ‘dogma’ in the sense in which some say, quite broadly, that a dogma is the acquiescing in something; for the sceptic assents to those experiences that, as impressions, are forced upon him—for example, he would not say, when heated or chilled, ‘I think I am not heated (or: chilled)’. Rather, we say that they do not dogmatize in the sense in which others say that a dogma is the assent to one of the non-evident things that are investigated in the sciences. For the Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything non-evident. (PH 1.13, tr. Annas/Barnes with changes)²⁵

The one point that I want to make on this contested passage is that Sextus, notably, admits to some kind of assent in the sceptic’s life. However, I want to suggest that it is of great importance that he does so in the context of talking about experiences that have a certain kind of necessity. Heat and cold, and we might add (with a view to later passages), hunger and thirst, have a particular quality—these experiences are not like seeing a red house, or finding an argument implausible. They are compelling in a way that seems intricately connected to action (perhaps even to something like ‘instinctive’ action, such as the shrinking away from fire, or wrapping oneself up in anything that provides protection from the cold). Assent, I want to suggest, has a place in the sceptic’s life as Sextus portrays it. But its key role is not to explain that the sceptic acquires some beliefs, such as “I am cold”. The sceptic would not dispute that he is cold, if he is. But the point of the idea that such experiences have a certain necessity is that they propel us into

²⁵ Nearly every word in this translation could be disputed, and I depart from Annas and Barnes in quite significant ways (e.g., by rendering *dogma* as ‘dogma’, rather than ‘belief’). However, this is not the place to discuss the question of whether the sceptic holds any kind of beliefs, and I shall abstain from taking a stance on the intricacies of this issue.

action, not that, while the sceptic has no other beliefs, he has a bunch of beliefs which report his present physical condition.

In PH 1.21-24, the necessitation of the affections is not associated with assent. We only get the brief note that these compelling experiences lead us to food and drink and so on. But at other points in the *Outlines*, precisely these cases are associated with what Sextus calls *forced* assent (cf. PH 1.13, 19, 29-30, 193, 237-8). Hunger, for example, necessitates our assent, and thus moves us to eat. Again, Sextus does not claim that the sceptic ‘adheres’ rather than assents, or assents to something like ‘it is persuasive that I am hungry.’ Rather, the sceptic assents to the impression that he is hungry. The reason why this assent is not inconsistent with suspension of judgment is that it is forced. It is not in the sceptic’s power, and it does not involve the view that one should perform a certain action. The notion of ‘forced assent’ is quite ingenious. It turns the Stoic theory upside down. According to the Stoics, it is the mark of assent that it is ‘in our power’. Sextus here devises a kind of assent that lacks precisely this core feature. ‘Forced assent’ seems like a pun on the Stoic conception of assent.

Let us turn to the third and fourth aspect of the sceptic’s fourfold way of life. The sceptic adheres to the value judgments of his community, but not as his own views. Customs and laws are appearances. The sceptic ‘falls in’ with the ways of life in his community.

Similarly, the sceptic adopts ways of doing things that require expertise. In the course of his life, he receives instruction in many areas, some of them part of ordinary life (e.g., being able to fix himself breakfast), some of them part of professions (e.g., if he is trained

as a doctor, which medications to prescribe for which illnesses). Custom and training explain, for a number of contexts, why the sceptic does some things, but not others.

In PH 1.21-24, Sextus does not address the question whether adherence to custom and technical instruction involves any kind of assent. However, at PH 2.102, Sextus says that the sceptic gives undogmatic assent to the things that ordinary life relies on, and we might thus think that *undogmatic* assent figures in these aspects of the sceptic's life.²⁶

Like forced assent, this notion is, from the point of view of the Stoics, nonsensical.

Perhaps there are no other features of Stoic assent that are as central as these two: that assent is in our power, and that assenting is holding something to be true. For the Stoics, 'undogmatic assent', and that is, assent by which one does not come to hold something as true, simply is not assent.

How can Sextus hope to put the notions of forced and undogmatic assent forward in the context of dialectical argument? The dimension of Stoic thought about assent that he exploits, it seems, is that, according to the Stoics, impressions have a *psychological effect*

²⁶ At PH 2.100-102, Sextus says that, although the sceptic rejects the kind of sign which supposedly reveals something that is by nature non-evident (e.g., the bodily motions as signs of the soul), he does not argue against the kind of sign which ordinary life relies on, and which reveals something that is only occasionally non-evident—the so-called 'commemorative sign' (e.g., smoke is a sign of fire, a scar is a sign of there having been a wound). The sceptic gives undogmatic assent to the things which ordinary life trusts (cf. M 8.156-158). Another class of appearances that the sceptic adheres to is the ordinary usage (*sunêtheia*) of language. While he disputes the theses of grammarians, the sceptic must adhere to these appearances (which also have a normative side—think of 'speaking well'; M 2.52) in order to be able to speak and investigate (M 1.172, 193, 206, 218, 229, 233; M 2.52-3, 58-9). On Sextus' claim that the sceptic accepts commemorative signs, cf. James Allen, *Inference From Signs: Ancient Debates About the Nature of Evidence* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 87-146. For discussion of aspects of ordinary life not mentioned in PH 1.21-24, see Vogt (1998, 166-172).

on us. Sextus perhaps detects, rather ingeniously, one of the most delicate balances that the Stoics need to strike. With a view to determinism and responsibility, the Stoics must insist that assent is in our power. But they also have to explain why we all tend to be fools, which includes the vice of precipitancy (being too hasty in assenting). They thus need to tread a fine line between insisting on our control over assent, and recognizing the at times almost irresistible pull that certain impressions have for us. Cognitive impressions, according to the Stoics, almost “pull us by our hair” toward assent (M 7.257).²⁷ The sceptic questions whether there are any cognitive impressions. But he can still utilize the dogmatist’s view that some impressions have this kind of power. He can exploit the fact that, according to the Stoics themselves, impressions *move* us, and have powers that quite possibly overwhelm us. (For the sceptic to be in a position to argue dialectically it need not be the case that we cannot think of a Stoic rejoinder; rather, the threshold which must be met is that the sceptic can point to Stoic claims which help him advance his argument.)

7. Nature’s guidance

Let us now turn to the first point in the sceptic’s list of adherence to appearances: nature’s guidance. From the immediate context, it is not clear how this fits in.²⁸ Why is the fact that the sceptic can perceive and think a result of nature’s guidance? And why does it need to be explained within the reply to the Apraxia Challenge? First, I suggest, we

²⁷ Cf. the way in which persuasive impressions are said to cause ‘gentle movements’ in the soul, which make us inclined to assent (M 7.242); further, our widespread corruption can partly be attributed to the way in which things have a persuasive power (DL 7.89).

²⁸ I discuss various interpretations of the passage in: “Skeptische Suche und das Verstehen von Begriffen,” *Wissen und Bildung in der antiken Philosophie*, eds. Ch. Rapp and T. Wagner (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2006), 325-339; and Vogt (1998), 157-165.

should note that it is a dogmatic idea that nature makes us acquire the abilities to perceive and think.²⁹ According to both the Stoics and the Epicureans, human beings acquire reason in the early years of their lives. Reason is here understood in a substantive way: to have reason means to have acquired preconceptions and thus to have mastered a certain amount of content. Having a preconception of a tree, for example, involves being able to identify (most) trees as trees, and to frame questions about trees (such as ‘what distinguishes a tree from a bush?’). It is through the formation of preconceptions that we perceive trees as trees, and that we are able to think and investigate.³⁰

One of the major activities in the sceptic’s life is investigation. In order to respond to the Apraxia Challenge, the sceptic must not only explain how he can put on a coat or eat his breakfast. Perhaps more than anything else, he must explain how he can persist in his investigation—without this, he would cease to be a sceptic. But why is the sceptic’s search problematic? Traditionally, scholars have emphasized that it is difficult to see how the sceptic might still ‘seek the truth,’ even though, after his conversion to scepticism, he applies an arsenal of argumentative modes that reliably produce suspension of

²⁹ Cf. M. Frede, “The Empiricist Attitude towards Reason and Theory,” in: *Apeiron* xxi, 1988, 95. Note that, with respect to this problem, the Epicureans seem to play a rather important role. In M 8.337, Sextus explicitly refers to them. Key passages for the theory of preconceptions are: Aëtius 4.11.1-4 = SVF 2.83 = LS 39E (Stoics); DL 10.31 = LS 17A and DL 10.33 = LS 17E (Epicurus).

³⁰ On preconceptions, cf. Charles Brittain, “Common sense: concepts, definition and meaning in and out of the Stoa,” in Frede, D. and Inwood, B. (eds.) *Language and Learning. Philosophy of Language in the Hellenistic Age*. Proceedings of the Ninth Symposium Hellenisticum (Cambridge, 2005), 164-209; John Cooper, “Stoic Autonomy,” in Cooper, *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good* (Princeton, 2004), 204-244; Michael Frede, “Introduction,” in Frede, M. and Striker, G. (eds.) *Rationality in Greek Thought* (Oxford 1996), 1-28; Brad Inwood “Getting to Goodness,” in Inwood: *Reading Seneca. Stoic Philosophy at Rome* (Oxford, 2005), 271-301; Katja Vogt “The Good is Benefit” (forthcoming BACAP).

judgment.³¹ Further, the sceptic's tranquility might seem like an all-too miserable substitute for the quietude that he initially sought by trying to find answers to troubling questions.³² There is, however, a third problem to consider. According to Hellenistic assumptions, *understanding* the questions that are under discussion, and the concepts they employ, involves mastering a certain amount of content. But this might appear to involve making assumptions, which would be inconsistent with suspending judgment.

While Sextus does not refer to this problem in PH 1, he begins Book 2 of the *Outlines* with an elaborate account of it, and discusses it again in M 8.337 ff., saying that it is a charge commonly brought against the sceptics. I shall add this charge to my list of versions of the Apraxia Challenge, and call it the *Search Charge*. The sceptic cannot be a sceptic, i.e., engage in sceptic investigation (*skeptein*), if investigating involves assumptions in a way that is inconsistent with sceptic suspension of judgment. However, the *naturally* acquired assumptions that go along with preconceptions do not have this feature: they are acquired without assent (assent being a capacity which reason only has once one *already* has acquired preconceptions). The sceptic thus can understand and employ concepts. He is able to ask, for example, whether there is anything good by nature, and to have some understanding of what this question amounts to, without having assented to any assumption about what the good is, or what nature is.

³¹ G. Striker (2001); Casey Perin, "Pyrrhonian Scepticism and the Search for Truth," in: *OSAP XXX* (2006), 337-360.

³² Cf. G. Striker, "Ataraxia: Happiness as Tranquillity," in: *Monist* 73 (1990), 97-110.

We can now see why the first aspect in the sceptic's adherence to appearances is vital to Sextus' response to the Apraxia Challenge. Sextus needs to explain the sceptic's ability to *think*, of which his ability to investigate is an extension. In order to do so, he can dialectically employ the dogmatic view that a certain amount of content is acquired via a natural process—a process that does not involve assent and thus is consistent with suspension of judgment.

I think we should take Sextus' claim that the Search Charge is a standard anti-sceptical move seriously (PH 2.1). Sextus ascribes the objection to the Epicureans (M 8.337).³³ Much could be said about the differences between the ways in which Sextus discusses the objection in PH 2 and M 8. However, I shall only note one feature which seems significant. In PH 2, Sextus does not mention the term 'preconception' (*prolēpsis*) at all, even though it is quite difficult to phrase the issue without using it, and even though he cites some standard examples of preconceptions from the Stoic-Epicurean debates in theology. Note further that in M 11 Sextus explained the sceptic's adherence to customs and ancestral laws as choices that are based on his preconceptions. In PH 1, there is no mentioning of preconceptions. Everything is put in terms of adherence to appearances. And even though the sceptic's abilities to think and perceive are attributed to nature's guidance, which can really only be explained if we assume that Sextus dialectically employs dogmatic theories about the acquisition of reason, and thus about

³³ Lucretius formulates a related argument, however, against those who claim that nothing can be known (which Sextus does not claim): "[...] from where does he get his knowledge of what knowing and not knowing are? What created his preconception of true and false? And what proved to him that doubtful differs from certain?" (Lucretius 4.475-477 = part of LS 16A, tr. LS)

preconceptions, Sextus is extremely brief in PH 1, and does not mention the term ‘preconceptions’.

What are we to make of this? Note that, if Sextus would be prepared to refer to preconceptions, he would not need the relatively complex account that he gives in PH 1. Like in M 11, he could simply say that sceptic action relies on preconceptions. Preconceptions are acquired before the mind even has the capacity to assent, and so there is no issue here about the sceptic’s consistency. The brief account of sceptic activity in M 11 seems nicely neat, and in some sense fully sufficient.

Depending on our views about the relative chronology of Sextus’ works, I think we can draw either of the following conclusions. If we think that M is the later work, we might think that Sextus here hits upon a much easier way of explaining the sceptic’s actions—they can simply be explained by reference to preconceptions. We might add that the talk about *phainomena* could be wedded to an early, Aenesidemian version of scepticism, and really becomes obsolete once Sextus finds the neater argument via preconceptions. However, if we think that PH is the later work, we might think that the complex account of adherence to appearances actually supersedes the relatively simple account in M 11. But what could be too simple about this account? Here is my suspicion (and it is not more than a suspicion). As neat as the account of sceptic action via preconceptions is, it is a dangerous route. For once the sceptic dialectically buys into the dogmatic idea that human beings acquire a certain amount of content in a natural process of ‘growing into the world’, it might seem excruciatingly difficult to draw a line between

this natural process, and further developments of the rational soul that in fact do involve assent. For the dogmatists, it is not important to be able to identify a strict demarcation between the acquisition of preconceptions, and the further learning and refining of our concepts that continues throughout our lives. But if the sceptic wanted to exploit the theory of preconceptions, he would be settled with this task, and it might be impossible to perform this task without becoming a dogmatist—for, since the dogmatists do not really care, the sceptic could not exploit a view of theirs on where precisely we move from assent-free acquisition of conceptual content to the kind of learning that involves assent. (And quite possibly, it might turn out that some such notions as ‘validity’, ‘criterion’, and so on, are learnt rather late in life!)

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let me return to the questions I started out with. Is sceptic action, as Sextus portrays it, the action of rational human agents? Does Sextus, even though this could not be his intention (given that it would be a dogmatic enterprise), end up providing us with a plausible picture of how *we* act?

Let me sum up my discussion of the first issue in the following way. Sextus’ outline of sceptic action is in several respects further removed from Stoic assumptions than Academic discussion. Sextus does not argue that impulse could come about without assent. By making the notion of appearances key to his account in PH, and by not even mentioning impulse, he leaves the context of dialectical argument against the Stoics. Sextus is not even trying to show that, on the premises of the Stoics, the sceptic is a

rational agent. But he is, at the same time, careful to not portray the sceptic as a sub-human agent. He explicitly accounts for perception and thought, thus claiming certain aspects of human rationality for the sceptic.

On the second question, my tentative suggestions are the following. Sextus' discussions at least contain some aspects that could serve as an illuminating account of human agency. On the one hand, it might seem that, if it were true that we acquire notions of how to act and what to value early on in life (i.e., if we had the preconceptions that Sextus mentions in M 11), it might well be that, in certain situations, we fall back on these notions. Such early notions might sometimes prevail over ideas that we formed later in life. Or they might guide our actions when, for one reason or another, on-the-spot reasoning does not take place. With respect to the everyday actions that are at the center of PH 1.21-24, Sextus' picture could actually seem convincing for some of our actions. The sceptic way of life gives much room to learned actions that are performed without any genuine views, and this might be a plausible account of the ways in which we perform a number of tasks in everyday life. However, it would also seem that to most of us it is important that these are the less important things in our lives. For example, many of us do not care to acquire our own views on how to best install a printer cartridge, and are happy to simply follow the instructions (even if they might contain some overly complicated or cautious steps), because we would rather think about the file that we are about to print out. But as a general attitude to *all* one's actions, the sceptic's uncommitted way of viewing what he does is distinctively different from ordinary life.

The Pyrrhonian life is a life that only people who are troubled by philosophical questions could possibly adopt. Sextus' threefold distinction between those who hold doctrines, those who say that nothing can be known, and those who continue to search, does not encompass everyone (PH 1.1). Indeed, most people are—in a way that philosophers sometimes find difficult to comprehend—rather unreceptive to what might be disturbing about unsettled questions. This observation does not seem to me to arise from our own culture. Rather, it would seem that this is what Socrates encounters all the time, and what the sceptics will have studied in Plato's dialogues: not everyone worries whether their assumptions might be false, and, even if one is prompted by questioning through a skilled interrogator like Socrates, one might decide to simply not bother (think of the way many of Socrates' conversations end).

Thus it seems that the Pyrrhonian sceptic, even though he professes to adhere to ordinary life, does so in a highly unordinary way. He arrives at this adherence in the roundabout way of being first worried about all kinds of questions, and then delving into a highly specialized technique of investigating. His investigations generate suspension and peace of mind on theoretical matters, many of which concern questions of how one should be living. But the sceptic still has impressions—things appear to him in certain ways—some of which are particularly compelling. But even those which do not have the kind of necessity that hunger and thirst have can guide the sceptic's activities. The Pyrrhonian sceptic ends up with a life profoundly shaped by his philosophizing, a life that is oddly uncommitted and thus quite different from ordinary life.