

## SKEPTICISM AND EVERYDAY LIFE

Filip Grgić

### I

According to Sextus Empiricus, the Pyrrhonian skeptics “live in accordance with everyday practice (βιωτική τήρησις)” (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* [PH] I 23).<sup>1</sup> They follow an ordinary life or ordinary experience (ἐμπειρία) by conforming to common preconceptions (προλήψεις) and appearances (φαινόμενα), and this is how their life differs from the life of dogmatic philosophers, which is based on doctrinal beliefs (δόγματα).<sup>2</sup> By insisting on the skeptics’ favorable attitude toward everyday life, Sextus wants to support his rejection of the charge that taking a skeptical position entails inactivity and complete detachment from the world: while it is true to say that the skeptics do not live according to philosophical theory, in respect of which they are indeed inactive, they are active as far as non-philosophical practice is concerned (AM XI 165). Nevertheless, his intention is not only defensive, but he also sees the skeptics as champions and supporters of ordinary life, which he takes to be superior to a doctrinal or philosophical life. Moreover, the skeptics are allies to everyday life in its struggle against the dogmatists who have risen up against its preconceptions (AM VIII 158): “Hence not only do we not conflict with everyday life, but we actually join the struggle on its side, assenting without holding beliefs (ἀδοξάστως) to what it has found convincing and taking a stand against the private fictions of the dogmatists” (PH II 102).<sup>3</sup> The idea that the skeptics follow an ordinary way of living seems to include two things: first, that they are engaged in the *activities*

---

<sup>1</sup> Τήρησις is ‘observation’ (as in Annas & Barnes 2000; see Barnes 1997, 82 n. 89) or ‘regimen’ (as in Mates 1996). The word is common in writings of the Empirical doctors. I follow Bett (1997) in using ‘practice’ (see *Adversus Mathematicos* [AM] XI 165), but nothing in my argument depends on the exact meaning.

<sup>2</sup> See PH I 23–24, 231, 237; II 102, 246, 254, 258; III 235; AM VIII 158.

<sup>3</sup> All translations from PH are by Annas and Barnes (2000), occasionally with modifications.

that are characteristic of ordinary people, and, second, that they possess *mental states* that are characteristic of ordinary people or that are, at any rate, sufficient to explain the activities in which the skeptics engage.

Sextus' insistence on the close alliance of skepticism and everyday life is in several respects deeply problematic. To begin with, it may sound odd to hear a skeptic saying that he advocates everyday life and that everyday life is superior to life that includes philosophical beliefs. We are accustomed to think of ordinary, non-philosophical life—or, as we would nowadays say, life based on common sense beliefs—as seriously challenged by skeptical arguments. Skeptics want to argue that our common sense claims that we know something, globally or locally, are not tenable, and that common sense beliefs cannot be rationally justified. In this respect, philosophical skepticism can be seen as the denial of common sense. Common sense can at best be excused from skeptical attack by shifting skeptical arguments to a level or a context above the everyday. Nonetheless, save for those who endorse a version of the so-called common sense philosophy, *if* subjected to skeptical scrutiny, common sense judgments cannot be immune to skeptical attack, let alone be considered skeptical allies. This, of course, does not apply to every form of philosophical skepticism. With moral skepticism, for example, things are probably rather more complicated. However, the traditional skepticism about knowledge or about the external world, inspired by Cartesian arguments, is an obvious adversary to common sense.<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, Pyrrhonian skepticism is a special form of skepticism, evidently different from traditional external world skepticism inspired by Cartesian arguments. It seems, however, that there are some reasons to think that a Pyrrhonist's attitude toward common sense must be the same as the attitude of the traditional external world skeptic, and that the idea of the alliance between Pyrrhonism and everyday life is in many respects shaky. For one thing, Sextus' urging that the Pyrrhonists are champions of everyday life seems to contradict their central recommendation, that we should suspend judgment about everything. For, obviously, on any plausible conception of ordinary life, pursuing an attitude of suspension of judgment because of the equal force of the opposed claims cannot be seen as part of such a life. The Pyrrhonists say that they live without beliefs, but this is certainly not the manner in which ordinary people

---

<sup>4</sup> On skepticism and common sense, see Lemos (2004), esp. 1–13; see also Bett (1993), esp. 364–366.

live their lives; indeed, ordinary life is permeated with various kinds of beliefs, including doctrinal beliefs, as Sextus himself recognizes. In addition, the Pyrrhonists insist that the ultimate goal of human action is tranquility in matters of belief and moderation of feeling in matters forced upon us (*PH* I 25, 30). It is far from clear that tranquility in matters of belief and moderation of feeling in matters forced upon us figures prominently among the ultimate goals of ordinary people's lives. However, if this is meant as a serious recommendation as to how to achieve a desirable human life, then the Pyrrhonists cannot insulate their skeptical attitude from everyday life and follow it only in their discussion against the doctrinal philosophers.

According to one tradition in the interpretation of Pyrrhonism, the appearance of Pyrrhonian skeptics as followers of everyday life is strongly supported by the fact that they do not see themselves just as philosophical skeptics, but, more importantly, as skeptics about philosophy and science.<sup>5</sup> They suspend judgment about what is said by *philosophers*, as far as *philosophical argument* is concerned, they do not hold beliefs about non-evident things, which are investigated in *sciences*, etc.<sup>6</sup>—that is, the targets of their criticism are philosophy and science, or any theoretically loaded domain. Hence, it seems that the Pyrrhonists are entitled to claim that they follow everyday life simply because they do hold ordinary, everyday beliefs, and it is only doctrinal, philosophical, or scientific, beliefs that are suspended. This does not mean that the Pyrrhonists are satisfied with ordinary life as such, since ordinary people's actions, just like philosophers', are sometimes governed by certain doctrinal beliefs. However, what we would get if we adopted skeptical strategy and suspended judgment about doctrinal issues would be just an ordinary human life free from what is, according to the Pyrrhonists, dogmatic vanity and deceit. On this view, then, the Pyrrhonists may be seen as reformers of ordinary human life, but not as very deep and radical reformers.

The difficulties with this view are well known and widely discussed. The central question is whether the Pyrrhonian suspension is indeed limited to theoretically loaded domains or the Pyrrhonists are rather

---

<sup>5</sup> A classical statement of such a view is found in Frede (1997); see also Brennan (2000). For the difference between philosophical skepticism and skepticism about philosophy, see Fogelin (1994), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. e.g. *PH* I 13, 20, 215; II 22, 26, 80, 95, 104; III 6, 13, 29, 56, 65, 81, 135.

committed to suspending every belief, despite of what they themselves occasionally say and despite the reasons that seem to support such an interpretation of their position. A further question is whether the beliefs, or mental states in general, that are left over and untouched by skeptical inquiries are sufficient to account for the actions that are characteristic of ordinary people. In any case, the idea is that if one manages to show that after suspension, the skeptics can retain the attitude toward the world that is typical for non-doctrinal attitudes of ordinary people, and if having such an attitude is sufficient for the explanation of ordinary human actions, then one may accept the Pyrrhonists' insistence that they are supporters of ordinary human life. That is to say, the Pyrrhonists' insistence that they are supporters of ordinary human life is justifiable if one can appropriately restrict the domain of their suspension and identify resources that are sufficient for the answer to the charge of inactivity.

If, on the other hand, the Pyrrhonian suspension is taken as unrestricted, that is, as extending to all beliefs, including beliefs of ordinary people, then we get a completely different picture of the Pyrrhonists' attitude toward everyday life.<sup>7</sup> In this case, we can no longer argue that the Pyrrhonists advocate ordinary life as led by non-philosophers, but we must suppose that they want to make a deep reform of ordinary life in order to adjust it to skeptical demands. It follows that the βίος that the Pyrrhonists supposedly follow is not just a way of living as such, but specifically a Pyrrhonian way of living, which is illustrated, for instance, in some ancient biographies of Pyrrho. If so, then it becomes much more difficult to identify resources that are, according to the Pyrrhonists, necessary for any sensible human life.

Therefore, on both interpretations, an important qualification should be attached to Sextus' insistence that the Pyrrhonists are supporters of ordinary life: they are not just supporters of ordinary life but they want to be its reformers as well. Thus, when Sextus compares his skeptical procedures with doctors', the patients he is trying to cure are not only dogmatic philosophers but ordinary people as well, as far as they hold various kinds of (unacceptable) beliefs. The difference between the two views is only in the depth of the reform. Hence, it seems that everything depends on how we understand the phrase "without holding beliefs" (ἀδοξάστως) in Sextus' account of the skeptics' way of life. According to the former view, which sees the Pyrrhonists primarily as skeptics about

---

<sup>7</sup> See, above all, Burnyeat (1997a) and Barnes (1997).

philosophy and science—and which, following Gail Fine (2000, 81), can be called the Some Belief View—the Pyrrhonists follow ordinary life by eliminating from it all doctrinal, and only doctrinal, beliefs, and the result, looking from outside at least, should be a life that does not differ profoundly from the life of non-philosophers. According to the latter, which Fine calls the No Belief View, the Pyrrhonists follow ordinary life by eliminating from it all beliefs. This is the proposal of the very deep reform, but the external appearance of such a life is not very clear.

So it seems that explanation of the Pyrrhonists' attitude toward ordinary life depends on the resolution of the Some Belief View—No Belief View dispute. Rather than entering into this complex and widely discussed problem of Pyrrhonian scholarship, in this paper, I will limit myself to a much more modest objective. It seems to me that regardless of whether we see the Pyrrhonists as deep or superficial reformers, both views require an answer to the question what it is that they want to reform. That is to say, what conception of everyday life the skeptics have in mind when they say that they live everyday life without holding beliefs? I believe that the answer to this question is important for the understanding of ancient Pyrrhonism, but that it has also some philosophical interest of its own.

## II

Let me first elaborate on the problem a little bit. At *PH* I 23–24, a passage that is in many respects central to our topic, Sextus gives a list of items included in “everyday practice”:

Thus, attending to the appearances, we live in accordance with everyday practice, without holding beliefs (ἀδοξάστως)—for we are not able to be utterly inactive. This everyday practice seems to be fourfold, and to consist in [1] guidance by nature, [2] necessitation by feelings, [3] handing down of laws and customs, and [4] teaching of kinds of expertise. [1] By nature's guidance we are naturally capable of perceiving and thinking. [2] By the necessitation of feelings, hunger conducts us to food and thirst to drink. [3] By the handing down of customs and laws, we accept, from an everyday point of view, that piety is good and impiety bad. [4] By teaching of kinds of expertise we are not inactive in those which we accept. And we say all this without holding beliefs (ἀδοξάστως).<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> The same list occurs at *PH* I 237. *PH* I 231 lists only laws, customs, and natural feelings.

Much of the understanding of this passage depends on how we take the word ἀδοξάστως, which qualifies both the skeptics' way of life and Sextus' account of their way of life. I will concisely discuss it at the end of the paper.<sup>9</sup> First, I would like to point to some problems concerning the phrase “to live in accordance with everyday practice without holding beliefs.”

This phrase can be taken in two ways. On the one hand, it can suggest that there is something like ordinary human life (“everyday practice”), which can be described independently of, and prior to, any skeptical (or dogmatic, for that matter) intervention in it, and which then is attended to by the skeptics in a special way, namely, without holding beliefs. On the other hand, we may take it that Sextus does not want to suggest that there is an independent domain of ordinary life and that there is a special way of approaching it, but that he wants to refer to a completely new domain, the domain of a skeptical way of living, which is characterized by the absence of beliefs but which can nevertheless be called “everyday life”. These two ways of reading the phrase correspond to viewing Pyrrhonists as superficial or as deep reformers.

If we adopt the first reading, that there is an independent domain of everyday life, then what we would like to know is how to describe this domain: what is it that the skeptics follow without holding beliefs? At first glance, it seems that Sextus is clear about this: everyday life consists of activities like perceiving, thinking, taking food or drink, following traditional customs and laws, and teaching arts. Taken in such a straightforward manner, however, the list is unsatisfactory for two main reasons. On the one hand, it is too narrow, for it is obvious that ordinary people are engaged in a much broader range of activities. The point is not that ordinary people hold beliefs, both doctrinal and non-doctrinal (for what we are trying to specify is everyday life as it is prior to, and independent of, the skeptical intervention in it), but that typical human life includes activities—such as cultivating certain virtues, enjoying intimate personal relations, engaging in certain activities exclusively for the sake of pleasure, making new social institutions, creating works of art, etc.—which are not mentioned in the list and it is not even clear what Sextus would make of them. In addition, the dogmatists would argue (and it seems that Sextus would concur: see *PH* I 26) that the main

---

<sup>9</sup> On ἀδοξάστως, see Barnes (1997), 78–79 n. 77, and below, p. 89 and note 27.

characteristic of human life is the pursuit of truth or knowledge. On the other hand, Sextus' list seems too generous. For instance, while handing down laws and customs is here included among everyday practices, in Sextus' discussion of Aenesidemus' tenth mode, it is among the items about which we should suspend judgment (*PH* I 163).

Suppose, to put the problem in more general terms, that we want to say of some proposition that it is a common sense proposition. What conditions should it satisfy to count as such? The problem is that it is very difficult to articulate the relevant conditions. For instance, while the proposition that honey is sweet may seem to be a typical member of the class of ordinary life propositions, it is also obvious that the same proposition may belong to the class of highly theoretically loaded propositions, if it is taken as based on the insight into the real nature of honey. Likewise, while it is undoubtedly a part of ordinary human life to say of someone that she is capable to see, this statement can also be taken doctrinally, say as based on the insight into human psychology or physiology.

An obvious reaction to that problem is to say that we should abandon the distinction between the domains and adopt instead the distinction between contexts in which sentences are uttered, or between ways in which propositions are taken, and the like. Thus, "Honey is sweet" is a constituent of ordinary life if uttered by someone during breakfast but not if uttered by a scientist in a laboratory. However, why would the former context be called ordinary and the latter not? If the relevant difference is in the way in which a proposition is taken—so that, for instance, "Honey is sweet" is an ordinary life sentence if in its uttering we do not imply that honey is really, objectively, sweet—then we must abandon the idea under consideration, namely, that there is a distinct domain of ordinary life which can then be described as something that the skeptics live without holding (doctrinal) beliefs, since in this case, the lack of (doctrinal) beliefs is already included in the description of ordinary life. It follows, then, that it is difficult to attach an independent sense to "everyday practice" in the phrase "to live in accordance with everyday practice without holding beliefs": it is either vaguely different from the sense of "non-everyday practice" or it already contains a reference to a skeptical qualification.

If we abandon the distinction between domains or contexts and adopt the second reading proposed above, that is, that Sextus is not interested in picking out an independent domain of ordinary life which is then followed by the skeptics in a specific way, but that he wants to stress the

fact that a life without holding beliefs *is* ordinary human life, then we understand the skeptics as deep reformers. It is easily seen that every item on Sextus' list can be pursued in both a dogmatic and skeptical manner. Thus, one can follow traditional laws and customs by having additional beliefs that they are objectively good, and arts can be taught by having additional beliefs that there are such things as teachers, learners, cognition, system of cognitions, etc. Skeptics want to pursue them without these additional beliefs, doctrinal or non-doctrinal (whatever that may mean), and this is what their *ordinary* life amounts to. If Sextus' list appears too narrow, we may try to subsume what seems to be missing under [1]–[4] and take it as pursued without additional beliefs. Thus, cultivating certain virtues, as typical human activity, can perhaps be subsumed under [3], enjoying intimate personal relations can be subsumed under [1] or [2] or even [3], pursuit of truth under [1] or [2], and so on. If, on the other hand, Sextus' list appears too broad, we may assume that following traditional laws and customs is here taken as not including additional beliefs, while in the tenth mode it should be taken as including such beliefs, etc.

In this case, however, it seems very odd to call such a life “ordinary”. A more pressing problem is that, according to this view, the scope of everyday life becomes too broad, since there is no limit to the range of propositions that the skeptics approach without holding beliefs, including philosophical and scientific propositions. That is to say, if the qualification “without holding beliefs” is already included in the meaning of “everyday practice,” then there is nothing with which the latter can be contrasted. Hence, there is nothing to which everyday life can be superior. Yet, Sextus not only insists that ordinary life should be preferred over philosophical life when pursued in a skeptical manner, but that it should be preferred as such. In this, he is followed by philosophers who, for various reasons, advocate common sense, for they share the idea that when common sense beliefs are contrasted with philosophical beliefs which are incompatible with them—this applies especially to skeptical beliefs about the existence of various kinds of things—then it is always more reasonable to accept the former. A very clear statement of the priority of common sense beliefs is found in the following passage from Moore:

This, after all, you know, really is a finger; there is no doubt about it: I know it, and you all know it. And I think we may safely challenge any philosopher to bring forward any argument in favour either of the proposition that we do not know it, or of the proposition that it is not true, which does not

at some point rest upon some premiss which is beyond comparison, less certain, than the proposition which it is designed to attack.

(Moore 1960, 228)

One can hardly deny that a Pyrrhonist should take the same attitude toward common sense beliefs, if she is indeed an advocate of ordinary life. In Sextus' writings, however, ordinary life is often presented either as one side of an undecidable dissent or itself as a battlefield where dissenting sides are opposed, and in neither of these cases, it is granted priority. Thus, when introducing the first mode of Agrippa, Sextus says: "[W]e find that undecidable dissension about the matter proposed has come about both in ordinary life and among philosophers" (*PH* I 165). A typical example of the involvement of ordinary life in undecidable dissensions and its apparent overthrowing is Sextus' discussion of motion, to which I will shortly turn: while philosophers such as Parmenides, Melissus, and Diodorus Cronus say that there is no such thing, ordinary life and philosophers from Pythagoras to the Stoics or Epicureans say that motion exists (*PH* III 65, *AM* X 45). Since the skeptics are forced to admit that they suspend judgment about whether motion exists, it is not immediately clear what is the status of ordinary judgments in this dispute, and how the skeptics can still insist that they give priority to ordinary life and its judgments. The same holds for the dispute about place (*PH* III 120, *AM* X 7–8; see also Burnyeat 1997b, 101–111) or number (*PH* III 151); and Sextus, to turn to Moore's example, suspends judgment about whether there is such a thing as a body (*PH* III 49; for a thorough discussion, see Fine 2003, 362–369). Therefore, it is not clear how the Pyrrhonists can endorse the principle of the priority of ordinary judgments over doctrinal ones.

### III

To illustrate these problems, let me briefly consider Sextus' discussion of motion (*PH* III 65–81; a much fuller discussion is found at *AM* X 45–168; see also Bailey 2002, 200–205). As usual, he wants to show that we must suspend judgment about whether motion exists: while some say that it exists and some that it does not exist, the skeptics insist that there is equipollence between these claims, that is, that neither of them can be overthrown, so that we should suspend judgment. Those who say that motion does not exist, rely on abstract philosophical arguments. Thus, we find an argument that nothing moves because nothing is moved either by

itself or by something else (67–69). There is also Diodorus Cronus' argument against motion,<sup>10</sup> and Sextus even refutes three counterarguments against it (72–75). Finally, we find an argument according to which nothing moves because a thing can move neither over its first part nor over a divisible interval all at once (76–81).

On the positive side, the one that affirms the existence of motion, we do not find philosophical arguments, but Sextus appeals to everyday life and to the evident facts (ἐνάργεια):

[I]f there is no such thing as motion, they say, how does the sun travel from its rising to its setting, and how does it produce the seasons of the year, which come about because it is near to us or far from us? How do ships which have put out from harbour come in to other far distant ports? In what way does someone who denies motion leave his house and return to it again? These considerations, they say, are perfectly uncontestable. (This is why one of the Cynics, when the argument against motion was propounded, gave no answer but stood up and walked away, establishing by his action and evidently (διὰ τῆς ἐναργείας) that motion is real.) This, then, is how these people attempt to discountenance those who take the contrary position. (PH III 66)

The result is that motion no more exists than it does not exist: it exists as far as what is evident is concerned, or as far as everyday life is concerned, but it does not exist as far as philosophical argument is concerned. Therefore, Sextus does not say that everyday life has priority. The arguments based on everyday life are just as credible as abstract philosophical arguments. The conclusion seems to be that it is not possible to say whether *motion* exists—not that it is not possible to say whether *motion as conceived by philosophers* exists. If we rely on common sense beliefs, one might say, then we precipitately assent to the proposition that there is such a thing as motion—not to the proposition that there is such a thing as motion as far as philosophical argument, or philosophical sense of the term “motion”, is concerned.<sup>11</sup>

Such an abandonment of the principle of the priority of common sense can be seen as one of the motivations for the objection that the skeptics

<sup>10</sup> PH III 71: “If something is moved, then it is moved either in a place in which it is or in a place in which it is not. But neither in a place in which it is (it is at rest in it, since it is in it), nor a place in which it is not (a thing can neither act nor be acted upon where it is not). Therefore nothing moves.”

<sup>11</sup> The similar conclusion regarding Sextus' arguments about place is found in Burnyeat (1997b), esp. 106.

reject appearances (*PH* I 19–20).<sup>12</sup> This is a particular case of a general objection that the skeptical position is basically incoherent. Sextus does not say who is the author of the objection and what are the arguments behind it. We may freely assume, however, that his opponent is confused by the skeptical practice in which appearances are opposed either to other appearances or to thoughts, and by the fact that suspension of judgment implies rejection of both sides. Sextus gives two answers to this objection:<sup>13</sup>

- (a) “As we said before, we do not overturn anything which leads us, without our willing it, to assent in accordance with a passive impression—and these things are precisely appearances”. (*PH* I 19)
- (b) “When we investigate whether existing things are such as they appear, we grant that they appear, and what we investigate is not appearance but what is said about appearance—and this is different from investigating appearance itself”. (*ibid.*)

Sextus implies in (a) that the criterion of whether a mental state is acceptable for the skeptics is the manner in which it is formed: they accept only those mental states which are the result of passive and involuntary assent. Thus, a skeptic cannot but admit that it appears to him that a ship has come in from one port to another, and his having such an appearance is not what he rejects. The problem is that it seems that the same must hold for what is opposed to this appearance, for example, the thought that Diodorean arguments against the existence of motion are valid. For, as we know, the skeptics oppose appearances and thoughts. The word “appearance” is sometimes used by Sextus in the sense of “the object of perception”, as in the definition of skepticism (*PH* I 8–10) or in the account of the forms in which the oppositions are made (*PH* I 31–34). However, it is also used in a wider sense, including both the

---

<sup>12</sup> Although presumably not the only motivation. It is quite possible that the objection was more complex. Perhaps the opponent was insisting that “(a) It appears to me that *p* but (b) I do not believe that *p*” is self-contradictory, so that the skeptics must reject either (a) (appearances) or (b) (and admit that they hold beliefs).

<sup>13</sup> Actually, he gives three answers; see the last sentence in I 20: (c) “And if we do propound arguments directly against appearances, it is not because we want to reject the appearances that we set them out, but rather to display the rashness of the dogmatists.” It seems to me, however, that (c) is just a variety of (a), since for the skeptics, a proper method of investigation whether a thing is such as it appears is to set out oppositions among appearances.

objects of perception and the objects of thought.<sup>14</sup> Regardless of the exact scope of the word “appearance”, however, it seems that Sextus understands thinking as a matter of passive acceptance, analogously to perception:

For a skeptic is not, I think, barred from having thought, if it arises during the discussions which give him a passive impression and appear evidently to him and if it does not at all imply the reality of what is being thought of—for we can think, as they say, not only of real things but also of unreal things. Hence someone who suspends judgement maintains his sceptical condition while investigating and thinking; for it has been made clear [(a) above] that he assents to any impression given by way of a passive appearance insofar as it appears to him.<sup>15</sup> (PH II 10)

Thus, when tasting a piece of honey, the skeptic becomes “sweetened”, that is, it appears to him that honey sweetens. His being sweetened is a mental state that is, first, evident to him, i.e. it is not the result of an inference or inquiry, and, second, forced upon him, since he has received the impression involuntarily and cannot but acquiesce in it. Likewise, in the case of thoughts, Sextus seems to be arguing, when hearing an argument given by an atomist according to which honey is neither sweet nor not-sweet, thanks to his natural ability to think (PH I 24), he forms a thought, understands this argument and its force, and cannot but admit that it appears to him as, say, valid.<sup>16</sup> As an explanation, or part of an explanation, of the process of thinking, this, of course, seems quite unsatisfactory. Regardless of that, however, I do not see that Sextus could offer any reason as to how, given his overall position, he could argue that the mental states he is in when tasting honey during breakfast or when seeing a ship coming could come about differently than the mental states he is in when hearing an atomist saying that honey is neither sweet nor not-sweet or when hearing Diodorus arguing that motion does not exist.

Thus, if mental states typical of (skeptical) ordinary life are characterized by the manner in which they are formed, that is, by the fact that they are instances of passive acceptance, then Sextus is not able to retain the principle of the priority of everyday judgments, and this is what

---

<sup>14</sup> See, above all *AM* VIII 362 and *PH* II 10; Frede (1973), 809–810; Burnyeat (1997a), 39. Perhaps more importantly for our present topic, see *PH* III 136–138, where Sextus says that “so far as the appearances go, there seems to be such a thing as time; but so far as what is said about it goes, it appears non-subsistent” (136), and then, as instances of appearances, he lists various philosophical definitions of time.

<sup>15</sup> I retain the manuscript *λόγων* in the first sentence.

<sup>16</sup> Some implications of this are discussed in Grgić (2008), 443–444.

the objection about skeptics' rejection of appearances implies concerning Sextus' insistence that the skeptics are supporters of everyday life. It follows not only that the skeptics suspend judgment about what is evidently given in everyday life and thus abandon the priority principle; it also follows that the manner in which mental states are formed cannot be the basis for the demarcation of everyday from non-everyday life, since on this criterion, life according to any appearance turns out to be everyday life, including life according to the appearance that motion does not exist. The same follows if, instead of the manner in which a mental state is formed, we take its ontological implications and say that for a skeptic, being in a certain mental state has no ontological implications whatsoever, while for a dogmatist, it implies the reality of its object. Now, while the lack of ontological implications certainly *is* the basic characteristic of the skeptics' mental states, it does *not* say anything either about the demarcation or the priority problems. Sextus cannot maintain that what makes the skeptics' life ordinary is the fact that when it appears to them that *p*, then they necessarily do not have an additional belief that it is really the case that *p*. For, since *p* can stand for any proposition whatsoever, it follows that ordinary life has to do with an unlimited range of propositions. That is to say, even though having no additional dogmatic beliefs is the mark of the skeptical way of life, it does not tell us why such a life can be described as ordinary.

It seems that Sextus' remark (b) is not of much help either. (b) says that skeptics do not reject appearances since they do not investigate appearances, but what is said about appearances. "To investigate" in Sextus can mean "to investigate against", that is, it can refer to the process of putting thoughts and appearances in opposition to demonstrate the need for suspension, and such a meaning is suggested a little later in the text, where Sextus talks of "propounding arguments directly against appearances" (*PH I 20*).<sup>17</sup> "To investigate what is said about appearances" here presumably means simply "to investigate whether a thing is really such as it appears." Thus, a skeptic does not reject the fact that it appears to her that a ship has come, since this is not what she investigates; what she investigates is "what is said" about this, that is, the fact that a ship's coming in may serve as an indicative sign for the proposition that there is such a thing as motion or even that there is a ship coming. Again, as

---

<sup>17</sup> See above, note 13.

in the previous case, the same holds for the appearance that may serve as an indicative sign for the proposition that motion does not exist, for example, for the appearance that Diodorean arguments against motion are valid. Therefore, we are again left without a criterion on the basis of which it may be said that what is evident has priority over philosophical arguments.

#### IV

I have argued that there are some problems concerning Sextus' phrase "to live in accordance with "everyday practice" without holding beliefs." On the one hand, we have seen that it is difficult to attach a distinct sense to "everyday practice" since it is not clear what are the independent criteria for demarcating everyday from non-everyday life, that is, criteria that do not already include a reference to a skeptical qualification. On the other hand, if the phrase is taken to stress the fact that a life without holding beliefs is an ordinary human life, then we are also left without a criterion of demarcation, since the skeptics withhold belief about every proposition, including everyday propositions, as is seen in Sextus' discussion of motion. In addition, this discussion has shown that everyday judgments—even *skeptical* everyday judgments, let alone everyday judgments as such—cannot have priority over doctrinal ones because of the manner in which they are formed or because they do not have ontological implications.

I believe, however, that the discussion of motion contains a clue as to how we can deal with these difficulties. It seems that what the skeptics oppose to philosophical arguments against motion in this discussion are not common sense judgments in the strict sense. It is true that the judgment that a ship has come or the judgment that Diogenes the Cynic is now walking can be taken in two ways: as implying that motion exists (this is how they are taken by those who use them as premises of the argument that motion exists) and as not having ontological implication (this is how they are used by the skeptics). There is, however, another distinction, that is, the one between these judgments taken as pieces of useful practical information (e.g., that my friend, who was on the ship, has come, or that Diogenes will soon no longer be here) and taken as constituents of a philosophical argument (e.g., that motion exists or that we should suspend judgment about whether motion exists). These distinctions do not necessarily coincide, for I can believe that Diogenes is

now walking without being aware that there is a philosophical argument about motion or without paying any attention to it. If one objects by saying that one cannot use the sentence “Diogenes is now walking” without assuming the existence, or at least the concept, of motion, the skeptic may retort that this is true, and that, in addition, there are arguments on the opposite side that there is no such thing as motion (or that motion is inconceivable), but that, if we use this sentence in order to say something useful to someone, then we are at the level of everyday life, which is characterized by paying no attention to philosophical arguments of any kind.<sup>18</sup>

After all, Sextus is not arguing by simply putting the judgment that a ship has come in opposition to the judgment that Diodorean argument is valid and *then* inferring suspension. He makes it very clear how these judgments are used: “*If motion does not exist*, then it is not possible for a ship to come from one port to another”—“*If motion exists*, then [Diodorean argument].”<sup>19</sup> It is only in such a use that the judgment that a ship has come can be a part of skeptical argument; likewise with Diogenes’ argument. We may take it as a simple attempt of direct disproof (“Look, I am walking; hence I am moving; hence motion exists”) or as a quasi-Moorean argument (“If motion does not exist, then now I am not walking; but I am now walking; therefore, motion exists”).<sup>20</sup> In *such* a use, however, even though it *is* evident and such that induces passive acceptance, Diogenes’ walking is *not* part of everyday life. In such a use, it is “far beyond the needs of ordinary life” (*PH* II 246).

Thus, Sextus would not be satisfied with the Moorean approach to the skeptical problem. He would object to the Mooreans that they use common sense judgments, like “I am now standing” or “This is hand,” in the non-common sense way, so that he could not accept the Mooreans’ claim that their argument is more credible than the traditional skeptics’. That is to say, he would insist that the Moorean approach could lead only to suspension of judgment about the existence of the external world. He would say that common sense beliefs, which are defended

<sup>18</sup> See *PH* II 244 and below, note 22.

<sup>19</sup> The similar form of argumentation is found in the discussion of place; see *PH* III 120: if place does not exist, then one cannot see right and left, up and down, in front and behind. See also III 17–19, on cause.

<sup>20</sup> See Moore (1959), 247.

by Reid, Moore, and others are just common sense *philosophical* beliefs, and that philosophy which is based on them is just philosophy, which is as dogmatic as traditional skepticism.<sup>21</sup> As soon as common sense judgments are removed from their normal practical use, they get the same status as doctrinal judgments, which have no other use than in philosophical arguments: they are futile as far as everyday human affairs are concerned.

A clear example of the difference between useful and useless, or genuine and counterfeit, common sense judgments is found in Sextus' discussion of sophisms (*PH* II 229–255). There are two basic kinds of sophisms: those which dialecticians are able to resolve but whose resolution is useless, and those whose resolution is useful, but which are not resolvable by dialecticians but by experts in the relevant domain. The first kind of sophisms seems to include a very broad range of arguments, presumably the whole of dogmatic philosophy, while the second class is restricted to sophisms within an art, for example, medicine. An example of a sophism of the first kind is Diodorus' argument against motion (*PH* II 242). There are two ways in which one can try to resolve it. First, one can try to construe a counterargument, a deductive proof with the conclusion that motion exists. Second, one can oppose to Diodorus' sophism an evident fact, like the fact that Diogenes is now walking or that ordinary people set out on journeys by land or by sea, etc. This does not mean, however, that in the latter case, where the sophism is refuted by the use of everyday judgments, its resolution becomes useful, or that the status of everyday judgments that are adduced in its refutation is different from the status of judgments that appear as premises in Diodorus' sophism. Both are pieces of philosophical reasoning which has as its outcome the suspension of judgment about whether motion exists.<sup>22</sup> The only

---

<sup>21</sup> Hence, I agree with Burnyeat (1997b), 116: "... Sextus' dogmatist argues in a manner exactly like Moore: One thing is to the right, another to the left, therefore there are places; Plato is where Socrates was, so at least one place exists [cf. *AM* X 8, *PH* III 120]. Compare: Here is one hand, here is another, so at least two external things exist. Sextus complains that this is circular; he does not complain that it is the wrong *sort* of argument to establish the thesis that place exists." My point is just that there is another, genuine common sense use of these propositions. See also Brennan's remark: "It is only when the Dogmatists attempt to enlist ὁ βίος into their schemes that Sextus crafts arguments that seem to call ὁ βίος into question. And even in these cases, what they call into question is not ὁ βίος itself, but the particular role assigned to it by the Dogmatists in question" (Brennan 2000, 74).

<sup>22</sup> One might object that, strictly speaking, my distinction between genuine and

legitimate and undisputable use of common sense judgments is outside philosophy, in matters of everyday life. In its normal, practical use, they are irrefutable by philosophical argument, just as medical sophisms are irresolvable by dialecticians (*PH* II 237–240). Sextus mentions “a witty anecdote” about the doctor Herophilus:

[O]ne day Diodorus dislocated his shoulder and went to Herophilus to be treated. Herophilus wittily said to him: “Your shoulder was dislocated either in a place in which it was or in a place in which it wasn’t. But neither in which it was nor in which it wasn’t. Therefore it is not dislocated.” So the sophist begged him to leave such arguments alone and to apply the medical treatment suitable to his case. (*PH* II 245)

Diodorus could have used his own theory of motion to refute Herophilus and show that his shoulder *is* dislocated (even though it has never been in the process of dislocating: *AM* X 48, 86). On the other hand, we might imagine an advocate of common-sense philosophy refuting Herophilus by pointing to the evident fact, that is, Diodorus’ dislocated shoulder. In both cases, a Pyrrhonist would insist that we must suspend judgment whether Diogenes’ shoulder is dislocated (it is dislocated as far as Diodorus’ argument and evident fact are concerned, but it is not dislocated as far as Herophilus’ argument is concerned). In Sextus’ anecdote, however, Diodorus abandons any appeal to philosophy and asks Herophilus to leave philosophical arguments alone, and in such contexts, the questions of whether his shoulder is dislocated or whether there is such a thing as motion do not even arise. In such contexts, philosophical arguments, including skeptical arguments leading to suspension, are inapplicable and useless.

One might object to this by saying that even if we accept that the genuine everyday use of the proposition that the ship has come does not assume either the concept of motion or the affirmation of the existence of motion or the awareness of the possible use of this proposition in an argument about motion, it still presupposes that the proposition is *true*, for it is only under such a presupposition that I will go to the port to meet my friend whom I expected to come with the ship. If so, then this

---

philosophical common sense judgments is not supported by the text, since what Sextus opposes to dialectical sophisms are common sense judgments in their normal, non-philosophical use (cf. *PH* II 244: “And ordinary men set out on journeys by land and by sea, and construct ships and houses, and produce children, *without paying any attention to the arguments against motion and coming into being*”). However, to put the quoted sentence in opposition to a philosophical argument *is* to use it in a doctrinal way.

proposition is by itself, as a constituent of everyday life, also a part of a possible philosophical dispute, say about whether there is such a thing as true proposition.

There are various skeptical strategies to meet this objection. The skeptics might argue, for instance, that to ascribe a property of being true to a proposition presupposes that the disputes about truth, the true, the truth-bearer, etc., are settled, and that, since this is not the case, we must suspend judgment as to whether we are justified in calling a proposition true or false. More to the point, they might argue that their demand that the disputes about truth etc. should be settled before we are justified in calling a proposition true is just as reasonable as the dogmatists' demand that a proposition should be accepted as true if it is to guide our action. Subsequently, they might add that the ordinary notion of truth is just as useful for everyday actions as the ordinary notion of motion, so that, even if the dispute about truth were settled, it would not be of much use. From the everyday point of view, all that is required to explain why I am going to the port are the facts that the ship has come and that I am expecting my friend.<sup>23</sup> Non-skeptics, both non-philosophers and philosophers alike, of course, do have various additional beliefs—that it is good, or that it is true, etc., that the ship has come—but Sextus' point is that they are simply redundant. That is to say, they are not necessary parts of the everyday, non-philosophical explanation of human action. To be sure, those additional beliefs are right there and constitute the web of beliefs of the ordinary person, and this is why ordinary life, as well as philosophical, is not exempt from skeptical scrutiny.

## V

Myles Burnyeat has argued that we cannot ascribe to ancient Pyrrhonists the idea of the insulation of skepticism from affecting the judgments of ordinary life. He summarizes his position as follows:

Every statement making a truth-claim falls within the scope of scientific investigation because, even if the statement itself is not at a theoretical level, it will still use concepts which are the subject of theoretical speculation: concepts such as motion, time, place, body. If these concepts are problematical, which Sextus argues they all are, and no line is drawn between

---

<sup>23</sup> Provided, of course, that the term 'fact' is used loosely, and not in a philosophical sense.

philosophical and empirical doubt, the original statement will be equally problematical. You will have to suspend judgement about whether next year's sabbatical will come for you to work on philosophy of time—and also, of course, about whether it would matter if it did not.

(Burnyeat 1997b, 115)

I agree that, for the Pyrrhonists, every proposition that uses concepts that can be involved in undecidable dissent falls within the scope of suspension, and propositions that seem to belong to the domain of common sense are no exception. I also agree that there is no difference between philosophical and empirical doubt, provided that “empirical” is used in a usual philosophical sense, and not Sextus’ (who typically uses it as a synonym to βιωτικός). I have tried to show, however, that in Sextus, we can find at least traces of a further distinction, at a lower level, between genuine common sense propositions and those allegedly such, which are as problematic as highly abstract doctrinal propositions. Genuine common sense propositions are those that are immune to skeptical attack or to any kind of philosophical refutation, but not because they have some special epistemic feature, for example, because they are evident. The property of being evident is ascribed to them only after philosophical intervention in them, whether dogmatic or skeptical. Rather, they are immune to skeptical attack simply because they are useful for human life, as opposed to propositions that occur in philosophical arguments. Thus, genuine common sense propositions are those modeled on propositions made by experts in those arts, which are acceptable for the skeptics and which they do not try to overthrow precisely because they are advantageous for ordinary human life: medicine (as far as it is pursued in the acceptable, that is, Methodist, manner: *PH* I 236–241), grammar (considered just as an art of reading and writing, *AM* I 49), agriculture, navigation (*AM* V 1), music (considered just as an instrumental skill, for example, skill in playing flute, *AM* VI 1), etc.<sup>24</sup> And just as there is, in Sextus’ view, a clear-cut distinction between acceptable and unacceptable arts, there is a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable βίος.

---

<sup>24</sup> See Barnes (1988), 62–66. Even philosophy seems to be included in acceptable disciplines (see *AM* I 296: “[P]hilosophers and the rest of the prose-writers teach the things that are useful,” transl. Blank 1998), but the reasons for this are not quite clear. Sextus insists that his skepticism should be seen as a kind of philosophy (*PH* I 4, 5, 11, 236; II 6, 9; *AM* VII 30, VIII 191) and that philosophy of the dogmatists is not a genuine philosophy, but only a “so-called” philosophy (*PH* I 6, 18; II 1, 12, 205; III 1, 278). Presumably, he thinks that skepticism is the only useful kind of philosophy.

Thus, a skeptic will and will not suspend judgment about whether next year's sabbatical will come: she will, if she is discussing the philosophical problem of the reality of the future, and she will not, if she is writing an application for a research grant. This does not mean, however, that Sextus does, after all, have the notion of insulation, and that his skepticism does not affect the judgments of ordinary life.<sup>25</sup> For, in that case, there would be no need for a reform of ordinary life, or for the skeptical therapy. Sextus is well aware of the fact that everyday practice includes beliefs of various kinds. When he says that the skeptics do not lead their life according to philosophical theory, but according to "non-philosophical practice" (*AM* XI 165), he cannot restrict the life according to philosophical theory to life that is characteristic of philosophers and their circles, which are deeply influenced by philosophical doctrines. Life according to philosophical theory must also include lives of ordinary people who believe, for instance, that pain is bad (*AM* XI 159), or that it is in itself a good thing to get a research grant and take the next year's sabbatical. In this respect, Sextus' skepticism is not, and cannot be, insulated from ordinary life. It is insulated, however, as far as non-philosophical practice, or βίος, is concerned. Non-philosophical practice, of course, includes skeptical life, or activities, which are not accompanied by beliefs that things are objectively such and such. My point is just that it is not limited to skeptical life, in that it can be *described* independently of it. Or at least Sextus so believes. Hence, there is an independent sense of "everyday practice" in the phrase "to live in accordance with everyday practice without holding beliefs" at *PH* I 23. To explain an everyday phenomenon, for example, the fact that we are capable of thinking, it is sufficient to point to nature's guidance. To this, some (that is, the dogmatic philosophers) would add that we are capable of thinking also because we have a special faculty, called mind or intellect, which is well described in various philosophical theories. Others (the skeptics) would insist that we should suspend judgment as to whether there is such a faculty, and it is because of this, that they see themselves as being closer to everyday life than the dogmatists. The same applies to other items on the list, as well as to those that are missing. Thus, to explain, from the everyday point of view, why people cultivate courage, it is sufficient to point to the fact that this is the matter of traditional customs. To insist that it is (also) because people are

---

<sup>25</sup> On the notion of insulation, see Bett (1993), esp. 370–381.

pursuing the good, and courage is a virtue, which is good, is to have a whole set of additional beliefs, which are all subject to skeptical scrutiny.

Thus, if the skeptics are indeed the advocates of everyday human life as it is independently of any philosophical interference, the only beliefs they have to eliminate are those in virtue of which genuinely common sense propositions become involved in philosophical disputes. That is to say, it is only “additional beliefs”<sup>26</sup> that are problematical for the skeptics, and ἀδοξάστως in Sextus’ account of skeptical way of life should best, I believe, be rendered “without having additional beliefs.”<sup>27</sup> The scope of these additional beliefs is, however, not very clear, for it is indeterminate what sorts of possible philosophical use of a proposition there are and in what ways they can be useful for ordinary human life. Hence, the account of everyday life given in this paper, by itself, does not resolve the Some Belief View–No Belief View dispute.<sup>28</sup>

### Bibliography

- Annas, J., & Barnes, J. (2000). *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bailey, A. (2002). *Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonian Scepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Barnes, J. (1988). “Scepticism and the Arts,” 53–78 in R.J. Hankinson (ed.), *Method, Medicine and Metaphysics: Studies in the Philosophy of Ancient Science* (special issue of *Apeiron* 21). Edmonton: Academic Printing and Publishing.
- . (1997). “The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,” 58–91 in Burnyeat & Frede (1997).
- Bett, R. (1993). “Scepticism and Everyday Attitudes in Ancient and Modern Philosophy,” *Metaphilosophy* 24: 363–381.
- . (1997). *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Ethicists*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Blank, D.L. (1998). *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Grammarians*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Brennan, T. (2000). “Criterion and Appearance in Sextus Empiricus,” 63–92 in J. Sihvola (ed.), *Ancient Scepticism and the Sceptical Tradition (Acta Philosophica Fennica 66)*. Helsinki: Philosophical Society of Finland.

<sup>26</sup> On having additional beliefs (προσδοξάζειν), see *PH* I 30, III 236; *AM* XI 158, 166.

<sup>27</sup> The skeptics achieve tranquility or state without feelings (ἀπάθεια) ἐν τοῖς δοξαστοῖς, and moderation of feelings in matters forced upon them: their feeling, for example, of pain is moderate because they do not have the additional belief that pain is a bad thing (*PH* III 235–236; I 26, 30). Hence, to live without δοξαστά is to live without additional beliefs that things that are forced upon one have certain properties.

<sup>28</sup> I am grateful to Diego Machuca for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

- Burnyeat, M. (1997a). "Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?" 25–57 in Burnyeat & Frede (1997).
- . (1997b). "The Sceptic in His Place and Time," 92–126 in Burnyeat & Frede (1997).
- Burnyeat, M., & Frede, M. (eds.). (1997). *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Fine, G. (2000). "Sceptical Dogmata: *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I 13," *Méthexis* 13: 81–105.
- . (2003). "Sextus and External World Scepticism," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 24: 341–385.
- Fogelin, R.J. (1994). *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Frede, M. (1973). "Review of Ch.L. Stough, *Greek Skepticism: A Study in Epistemology*," *The Journal of Philosophy* 70: 805–810.
- . (1997). "The Sceptic's Beliefs," 1–24 in Burnyeat & Frede (1997).
- Grgić, F. (2008). "Sextus Empiricus on the Possibility of Inquiry," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 89: 436–459.
- Lemos, N. (2004). *Common Sense: A Contemporary Defense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mates, B. (1996). *The Skeptic Way: Sextus Empiricus's Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, G.E. (1959). "Certainty," 226–259 in his *Philosophical Papers*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- . (1960). "Some Judgements of Perception," 220–252 in his *Philosophical Studies*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

