

# GREEK SKEPTICISM: FROM PYRRHO TO SEXTUS EMPIRICUS

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## Abstract

Translation of the works of Sextus Empiricus concerning Greek skepticism at the beginning of the 16th century activated the Continental philosophers and later the British philosophers. Skepticism did one great service to philosophy—it led to the introduction of the modern age of philosophy in the Continent. Later, Britain too, got liberated from the medieval thinking. Skepticism was a direct enemy of dogmatism. Many scholars consider Plato as the first skeptic and Aristotle as the first dogmatist. The view got currency through the influence of Arcesilaus and Carneades who were the directors of Plato's Academy during the Hellenistic age. The credit, however, is given to Pyrrho of Elis for giving birth to skepticism. It became mature by the time it reached the age of Sextus Empiricus. This paper is devoted to Greek skepticism. Since skepticism as a school of thought occurred only in Greece, a historical synoptic glance has been cast at the Greek skeptics, beginning with Pyrrho and ending with Sextus Empiricus.

**Key terms:** Greek Skepticism, Pyrrho, Sextus Empiricus, Arcesilaus, Carneades.

## I

Pyrrho is considered as the founder of the Greek school of skepticism. As a matter of fact, skepticism that took its birth in the Continent in modern times had its roots in Greek skepticism. It was the 16th and 17th century philosophers namely, Montaigne, Gassendi, and Marsenne who started interpreting the thoughts of the Greek skeptic

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Sextus Empiricus. Neither Descartes nor David Hume was unaware of the Greek skepticism. There are references to Pyrrho in the writings of Hume. Hume clearly mentions the name of Pyrrho and Pyrrhonism, and it is well known that Descartes started as a reaction to Pyrrhonian thinking. So Pyrrho can be described as the father of Western skepticism and not just the father of Greek skepticism. A reputed scholar of Greek philosophy of the Hellenistic age remarks, “that the name that the school bears, Sceptic, goes back to Pyrrho himself. The philosopher must consider and examine (skeptesthai) all opinions and recognize that all affirmations have the same validity.”<sup>1</sup> So Pyrrho becomes the father of skepticism in its real sense. This scholar further remarks concerning the impact of Pyrrho on western philosophy,

“it is this so-called Pyrrhonian Skepticism that we find systematized in the writings of Sextus Empiricus and that had a notable influence—not in the Middle Ages when the works of Sextus were barely known, but from the sixteenth century onwards. Many thinkers like Montaigne, Bayle, and Hume adopted a skeptical position and others like Gianfrancesco Pico, Descartes above all, and even Kant used skeptic arguments to demolish certain philosophical doctrines.”<sup>2</sup>

This, however, does not mean that Greek philosophers prior to Pyrrho were devoid of the skeptical attitude. Of course, their skepticism was partial. Heraclitus was skeptical about the nature of things surrounding us. He thought that contrary to our perception the universe is in constant motion and change. But Heraclitus did not mean that the real nature of the things could not be known. What he meant was simply that the reality is devoid of permanence. He succeeded in making the distinction between appearance and reality. It is only the appearance that presents permanence to our senses, because of appearance our senses are deceived into thinking that the real nature of the universe is also characterized by permanence. But Parmenides presents a wholly opposite view. The reality, he says, is characterized by permanence. Change and motion are deceptions introduced by our sense perception. The information that sense perception gives to Heraclitus is wholly different from the information given to Parmenides. Thus they held contradictory views about reality. If Heraclitus is right, then Parmenides is wrong. Pyrrho was well aware of the controversies going on in the Greek philosophy of his time.

If one accepts Pyrrho’s thought then one cannot say either that reality is permanent (Parmenides) or that is in flux (Heraclitus).

Pyrrho was a legendary figure. Like Socrates and Buddha, he never wrote anything. He only talked. So also like Socrates and Buddha, Pyrrho's talk also survived. He too had faithful disciples, well-known among whom was Timon. Timon's position was like that of Plato. Plato was responsible for propagating the thoughts of Socrates. Similarly, Timon propagated the thoughts of Pyrrho. Hellenistic philosophy owes more to Pyrrho than to any other philosopher of that time. He was a kind of Socrates of the Hellenistic world. According to A.A. Long, "for the Hellenistic philosophers, Pyrrho occupies a position that is comparable, in many respects, to that of Socrates in relation to the philosophy of the fourth century BC."<sup>3</sup>

## II

Pyrrho was born at Elis about 365 BC. He was a student of Anaxarchus. Anaxarchus was the court philosopher of Alexander the Great. That is how both Pyrrho and Anaxarchus got a chance to reach India with Alexander. It is said about Anaxarchus that he was influenced by the naked philosophers of India. Anaxarchus considered the physical world as illusory. According to Sextus Empiricus, "a good many people ... have said that Metrodours, Anaxarchus and Monimus abolished the criterion (of truth) – Metrodours because he said 'we know nothing, nor do we even know just this, that we know nothing'; and Anaxarchus and Monimus, because they compared existing things to stage-painting and took them to be like experiences that occur in sleep or insanity."<sup>4</sup> It is very common in India to call the physical world illusory. But this view was very uncommon in the Greek thought. It is doubtful if any philosopher prior to Anaxarchus held that the world is like a stage-painting. This view itself is sufficient evidence that Anaxarchus was influenced by the naked philosophers of India, who were described as Gymnosophists by the Greeks. Anaxarchus certainly influenced Pyrrho's thoughts. Pyrrho was influenced by the Gymnosophists of India. According to Diogenes Laertius, Pyrrho "would maintain that nothing is honourable or base, or, just or unjust, and that likewise in all cases nothing exists in truth; and that convention and habit are the basis of everything that men do; for each thing is no more this than this."<sup>5</sup> Pyrrho's reference to convention and habit as the guide of our actions sounds like David Hume. This is an attack on jurisprudence, ethics, ontology, and epistemology, etc. Aristoclis also points out, "According to Timon, Pyrrho declared that things are indifferent, unmeasurable and inarbitrable. For this reason, neither

our sensations nor our opinions tell us truths or falsehoods.”<sup>6</sup> Pyrrho is blaming not so much the limitation of our psyche as the nature of objects is supposed to occupy the reality. The objects happen to be so constituted that the human mind is unable to grasp them. Since opinions are formed on the basis of sensations, so if the sensations are rejected, opinions will also be rejected. Pyrrho rejected the assertions of Dogmatists who claimed to possess knowledge. He taught that every object of human knowledge involves uncertainty. He argued that it is impossible ever to arrive at the knowledge of the truth. According to Arne Naess, “Pyrrho’s Skepticism is.... superior to any other variant in its consistency, its radicalness, and also in its *practical* importance for intellectually gifted persons with high ideals of sincerity and honesty.”<sup>7</sup> If a skeptic is consistent he cannot avoid the radical conclusion. So if one sacrifices radicalism one would have to sacrifice consistency. “*Philosophical* skepticism covers all fields of articulated cognition or discursive thinking. Pyrrhonism belongs to that kind.”<sup>8</sup> He spent a great part of his life in solitude and was undisturbed by fear, or joy or grief. Pyrrho sees skepticism as to the road to perfect mental peace and the escape from the calamities of life.

Pyrrho said that the proper course of the sage is to ask himself three questions. Firstly, we must ask what things are and how they are constituted. Secondly, we ask how we are related to these things. Thirdly, we ask what ought to be our attitude towards them. As to what things are, we can only answer that we know nothing.<sup>9</sup> We only know how the things appear to us, but of their inner substance we are ignorant. If the real nature of things cannot be known either to senses or reason, then there is nothing by reference to which the truth or falsehood can be tested. Pyrrho is attacking all theories of knowledge, which seek to show that certain perceptual experience provides accurate information about the real nature of objects. We cannot get objects independent of sense-perception, and sense-perception provides no guarantee that we apprehend things as they really are. Objects in themselves are not available to test our sense-perception. Sense-perception reveals what appears to the percipient, but what appears cannot be used as sound evidence from which to infer ‘what is’. Like Kant, Pyrrho is making a distinction between Phenomenon and Noumenon. Things, as they are in themselves, cannot be known. It is only the appearances of things with which we are acquainted. A.A. Long says,

“Pyrrho is arguing that our perceptual experience can never be sufficient to warrant indubitable statements or beliefs about the external world.

He does not deny that something, say, yellow sweet and sticky *appears* to me and he will admit that I may be justified in saying, 'This looks like honey'. But he holds that my sense-perception is quite compatible with the proposition 'This is not honey' as well as the proposition 'This does not look like honey to Pyrrho'.<sup>10</sup>

Here Pyrrho is showing the difference between the object as perceived or appears and the same object independent of its being perceived. Pyrrho says that it is possible to have contradictory statements on each and everything. Arne Naess points out while interpreting Sextus Empiricus that the skeptic "finds that to any *pro*-argument for a doctrine or proposition there can be found at least an equally strong *contra* argument,.... he finds no better grounds for accepting the arguments in favour of the doctrine than for accepting those against."<sup>11</sup>

For Pyrrho both pro and contra arguments are equally strong and balanced, which leads him to detach himself from all judgements. So he suggested the suspension of judgements. He suspended judgements on moral concepts also. For Pyrrho suspension of judgements leads to freedom from confusion. According to Naess "... he (Pyrrho) eventually finds that *epoche* leads to, or is accompanied by, just that peace of mind (*ataraxia*) which he set out to achieve by finding truth."<sup>12</sup> Nothing is true or false. It only appears so. In the same way nothing is good or evil. Only it appears so. These appearances are sufficient guide for our actions, be they moral or non-moral.

It might have become clear that Pyrrho's skepticism was not something that was restricted to the theoretical level; he uses his skepticism for reaching a given form of life that can be characterized as life without attachment of any kind. Most, if not all of us, prefer to live an active life. But Pyrrho's preference was quite unlike ours. He lived a kind of life which exhibited detachment from the world. Detachment from the world presupposes the renunciation of desires. According to Timon, "Desire is absolutely the first of all bad things."<sup>13</sup> Pyrrho's skepticism was not the result of arm-chair thinking. It was the result of a deep study of life. While moving with Alexander's army, Pyrrho had first-hand experience with human suffering. In such a situation, indifference to the world would be a natural outcome. As Emil Brehier points out, "Pyrrho must certainly have had direct contact with Hinduism since while accompanying Alexander on his Voyages, he met the Hindu ascetics whom the Greeks called Gymnosophists and must have been struck by their insensitivity and indifference even to torture."<sup>14</sup>

## III

After Timon's death in 230 BC, there remained no direct disciples of Pyrrho to continue his tradition. Though Pyrrho died, skepticism survived. It became the property of Plato's Academy. For nearly 200 years skepticism was the property of Plato's Academy, of which the first skeptic director was Arcesilaus, who was supposed to be the head of the Second or Middle Academy. He was born in 315 BC. Like Pyrrho he also taught the suspension of judgements by providing arguments for two contrary positions. He revived the dialectical tradition of Plato, for which Diodorus became well known. Arcesilaus was rightly described by a contemporary of his time. "He was 'Plato in front, and Pyrrho in the back and Diodorus in the middle'", thus asserting that Arcesilaus was only in appearance Platonic/Platonist?, but Pyrrhonian in reality."<sup>15</sup> One can hardly deny Pyrrhonian influence on Arcesilaus. According to Kristeller, "Arcesilaus affirms that we must suspend our assertions about everything. Every perception and every assertion (*logos*) is uncertain. The arguments in favour of the contrary assertions are of equal force, and all things are incomprehensible (*akatalepta*)."<sup>16</sup> Arcesilaus introduced the term incomprehensibility. It was the opposite of comprehensibility. Stoics maintain the distinction between comprehensive perception and incomprehensive perception. Comprehensive perceptions are free from uncertainty. This led Arcesilaus to reject comprehensive perception altogether. If all perceptions are incomprehensible, then all of them are uncertain. Arcesilaus was dead against the Stoics.

According to Sextus Empiricus, there was one aspect in which Arcesilaus was different from Pyrrho. "For Arcesilaus, suspension of judgement was an "end in itself", whereas for Pyrrho this suspension carries with it the tranquility of the soul (*ataraxia*)."<sup>17</sup> There was another aspect in which Arcesilaus differed from Pyrrho. Pyrrho considered dialectic as an unnecessary exercise. But Arcesilaus was a dialectician and used dialectics in support of his skepticism.

Arcesilaus, in order to justify his headship of Plato's Academy, proposed a skeptic interpretation of Plato. The skeptic direction which Arcesilaus gave to Plato's Academy, lasted for almost two centuries. Referring to Arcesilaus, Diogenes Laertius points out that, "he (Arcesilaus) was the originator of the Middle Academy, being the first to suspend his assertions owing to the contrarieties of arguments. He was also the first to argue pro and contra, and the first to change traditional Platonic discourse and, by question and answer, to make it more of a debating contest."<sup>18</sup> The old Academy lost its original character, it was full of dogmatists who had no interest in dialectic.

So, in a sense, Arcesilaus gave a new lease of life to the Academy.

The second important academic skeptic was Carneades. His period is supposed to be 213-128 BC. He became the head of the Third Academy. The second Academy was headed by Arcesilaus. The contribution of Carneades to Greek philosophy was immense. He carried Greek philosophy to Rome. In 156 BC Carneades went to Rome as a part of an Athenian Embassy. It is said that Carneades made a profound impression on his listeners in Rome where he presented himself as a real skeptic, making his first lecture in favour of Justice and the second against Justice. As A. A. Long says, "when Carneades had been sent by the Athenians as an ambassador to Rome, he discoursed at length on justice in the hearing of Galba and Cato the censor, the greatest orators of the time. On the next day he overturned his own discourse with a speech putting the opposite position, and undermined justice which he had praised on the previous day."<sup>19</sup> Carneades had to show to Galba and Cato his own rhetorical exercise, therefore, the second lecture was essential. Secondly, Carneades wished to show that he was an opponent of his own views. That all views for him have hardly any value, speaking against Justice is as good or, as bad, as speaking in favour of Justice. Carneades gave a practical demonstration that he was a skeptic.

Carneades attacked the stoic's criterion of truth. Kristeller points out, "There is no criterion of truth, neither the intellect (*logos*) nor perception, nor Phantasy, nor any other thing, because all these things deceive us."<sup>20</sup> It is not only the empirical reality and judgements concerning reality that are doubted by Carneades, he also doubted "certainty of Axioms in mathematics."<sup>21</sup>

Carneades's major contribution is the concept of probability. His position is called probabilism, which is an intermediate position between radical skepticism and dogmatism. "Carneades was perhaps the first to introduce into logical and philosophical discourse, the concept of the probable (*pithanon*) which stands in the middle between the certain and the dubious. The New Academy was therefore characterized by probabilism."<sup>22</sup> Those who are working on probability will understand the importance of Carneades for drawing the attention of intellectuals to this concept. Once certainty is rejected, probability remains the only concept to be given a serious thought. One may find an echo of Carneades' thought in Hume. He too rejected certainty and had to fall back on probability.

Carneades finds that the concept of 'incomprehensive' introduced by Arcesilaus does not show that the incomprehensive perception must be uncertain. It is only by saying that perception is probable, it

is ruled out that it is certain. According to Sextus Empericus, “Despite the fact that everything is uncertain, for Carneades the probable is sufficient for judging and acting in daily life.”<sup>23</sup> Concerning both Carneades and Arcesilaus, a commentator writes,

“So great was Carneades’ stature and authority that after his death it was his philosophy more directly than that of Socrates and Plato that academics felt required to interpret and defend (this is perhaps why some sources treat his headship as the inauguration of the ‘New Academy’ with the school under Arcesilaus forming the ‘Middle Academy’ i.e. transitional phase).”<sup>24</sup>

Academic skepticism came to an end with Philo of Larissa. He was the head of the Academy from 109 BC. Sextus Empericus described him as the founder of the Fourth Academy. The fact that he is described as the founder of the Fourth Academy shows that he might have made some significant contribution to philosophy in general, if not to skepticism. It is through the writings of Cicero that Philo is known. For some years he was one of the principal teachers of Cicero. However, the commitment to skepticism which we find in Arcesilaus and Carneades is missing in Philo. If his impact has been as great as that of Arcesilaus and Carneades, the Academy would not have gone back to its old style. Though, the director of the New Academy was knocking at the gates of the old Academy.

Sometime in the middle of the first century BC, Aenesidemus started the Pyrrhonist movement, revolting against the New Academy headed by Philo of Larissa. He was based in Alexandria, not in Athens. Sceptics for Aenesidemus meant searchers. The Academic skeptics from the time of Arcesilaus to the time of Philo were not Pyrrhonists. Pyrrho rejected dialectics, but the Academic skeptics made use of it. Only Pyrrho’s actual personality was recognised by the Academic skeptics. For 200 years, Pyrrhonist philosophy was extinct, Aenesidemus revived it. His work *Pyrrhonist Discourses* survived. The aim of the book is to establish “that there is no firm basis for cognition, either through sense-perception, or indeed in thought.”<sup>25</sup> Both the phases, the earlier phase of Pyrrho and Timon and the later phase beginning with Aenesidemus have been well presented by Sextus Empericus. Of course, Sextus Empericus also exemplified the views of Academic skeptics. Aenesidemus has attacked not only the non-skeptical systems but also the Academic skeptics, particularly Philo, who drifted towards the old Academy.



## IV

It is said that Aenesidemus made a pioneering contribution to the skeptical methodology. This was done with the detailed discussion of 'ten modes' (tropes). They are nothing but ten ways of achieving the Pyrrhonist suspension of judgements. One may be surprised to know from Sextus that Skepticism for Aenesidemus was a road which leads to Heraclitianism. The surprise is because Aenesidemus was extremely devoted to Pyrrho, and for Pyrrho the aim was *ataraxia*. Whether Pyrrho accepted the doctrine of flux is questionable because he accepted no doctrine, be it the doctrine of flux or the doctrine of permanence. Why then did Aenesidemus refer to Heraclitus? According to A.A. Long and Sedely "...this *may* be adequately explained as a specifically anti-Stoic campaign on Aenesidemus' part. Heraclitus was regarded by the stoics as an important forerunner, and it has been plausibly suggested that Aenesidemus was trying to embarrass them by developing the un-Stoic aspects of Heraclitus' thought."<sup>26</sup> With Aenesidemus the centre of skepticism shifted from Athens to Alexandria, with Cicero it further shifted to Rome. Cicero used Latin in his writings so he was making Greek philosophy popular among the Romans. Prior to Cicero, Epicureans had their entry into Rome. Pleasure-loving people of Rome welcomed Epicureanism. Cicero, being a student of Philo of Larissa, accepted the moderate skepticism of the Academy. He rejected both Epicureans and stoics. However, as a jurist, he moved towards stoicism. It was certainly not his skepticism, but it was his stoicism that led him to natural law and natural justice. The credit for bringing Hellenism to Rome goes to Cicero.

The last but the most important member of the Pyrrhonist group was Sextus Empiricus. It was because of him that the Greek skepticism, not only Pyrrhonian, survived. His works, the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and *Against the Mathematicians*, had been translated into several languages. The history of skepticism has come to be preserved through Sextus. It is only through his work that we know about the different skeptical movements till the middle of the second century AD which was supposed to be his period. His works became popular after the fifteenth century AD, when they were translated into Latin, French, and some other languages. Sextus was originally a medical doctor and not a philosopher. He was not an original thinker or a genius but was a very good scholar. Both works exhibit his scholarship. His first book *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is devoted to ten modes (tropes) of Aenesidemus. It was through empirical investigation that Sextus

discovered that different animals have different sense impressions of the same objects. This is because different animals are different in their origins, physiological structures, and their audio-visual apparatus. The pattern of the argument is illustrated through the first mode as follows.

1. "X appears F to animals of kind K
2. X appears F\* to animals of kind K\*
3. It is impossible to decide whether the appearance of K or K\* has authority
4. So we suspend judgement as to whether X is really F or F\*."<sup>27</sup>

Likewise, different modes have been discussed in different ways, but the aim of all the modes is the same, i.e. suspension of judgements. These modes are as follows:

- "1. The mode depending on the disparity between animals; 2. that depending on the differences between men; 3. that depending on the different structures of the sense-organs; 4. that depending on situations; 5. that depending on positions, distances and locations; 6. that depending on admixtures; 7. that depending on the quantities and configurations of the objects; 8. that derived from relativity; 9. that depending on regularity or rarity of meeting; 10. that depending on ways of life, customs, laws, legendary beliefs and doctrinaire opinions."<sup>28</sup>

Before we end the discussion, there are some serious objections against Pyrrhonian skepticism that must be considered. The major objection is in regard to belief and action. An action is supposed to be the result of accepting a judgement. When one uses an umbrella to protect himself from rain, 'it may seem puzzling why a Pyrrhonist should open his umbrella if he does not even take the impression that it is raining to be true.' It was only because he thought that it was raining that he was led to open his umbrella. His action was the result of accepting the truth of a judgement. Sextus would reply "...that his actions are either instinctive, e.g. drinking when thirsty, or conditioned by customs and educational processes of his own society, and can therefore be performed automatically without the intervention of assent."<sup>29</sup> Pyrrho accepted custom and habit as the guide for living among appearances. Every action should be prefaced by a belief is the philosophers' myth which Pyrrho rejected. He lived till the age of 90 years in spite of the fact that he suspended judgements on all matters whatsoever. Similarly, "we can ascribe to Aenesidemus the position that ordinary acts of self-maintenance and self-preservation may be performed automatically, without assent."<sup>30</sup> This means that the actions of the Pyrrhonian skeptic cannot be the

result of a rational choice, they are like instinctive actions of animals. The superiority of man over the animal is dissolved. This is not a desirable consequence to which Greek skepticism has led us.

### Notes

1. Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Greek Philosopher of the Hellenistic Age*, tr .by Gregory Woods, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993, p. 46.
2. Ibid., p. 47.
3. A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*,Vol I, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1987, p. 16.
4. Cited in A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, Ibid., p. 14.
5. Ibid., p. 13.
6. Ibid., pp. 14-15.
7. Arne Naess, *Scepticism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1971, p. 1.
8. Ibid., p. 3.
9. See A.A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, GeraldDuckworth&Company Limited, London, 1974, pp. 80-81.
10. Ibid., p. 82.
11. Arne Naess, p. 4.
12. Ibid., p. 5.
13. A.A. Long and Sedley, p. 20.
14. Emile Brehier, *The History Of Philosophy The Hellenistic and Rome Age*, tr. Wabe Baskin, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1965, p. 107.
- 15 Paul Oskar Kristeller, p. 51.
16. Ibid., p. 51.
17. Ibid., pp. 52-53.
18. A.A. Long and Sedley, Vol. I, p. 439.
19. A.A. Long, p. 104.
20. Paul Oskar Kristeller, p. 89.
21. Ibid., p. 91.
22. Ibid., p. 93.
23. Ibid., p. 94.
24. A.A. Long and Sedley, V ol. I, p. 448.
25. Ibid., p. 468.
26. Ibid., p. 488.
27. Quoted by Christopher Hookway, *Skepticism*, Routledge, London, 1992, p. 8.
28. See A.A. Long and Sedley, Vol. I, p. 474.
29. Ibid., p. 471.
30. Ibid., p. 471.