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Logos &  
Episteme

Special Issue:  
**Epistemology's Ancient Origins and New  
Developments**

Guest Editor:  
**Scott F. AIKIN**



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# INTRODUCTION: EPISTEMOLOGY'S ANCIENT ORIGINS AND NEW DEVELOPMENTS

Scott F. AIKIN

Developments in epistemology are philosophically interesting for two reasons. The first is simply that they are advancements in the analysis of a core set of concepts—knowledge, belief, truth, and reason. Getting clear about these things is important, just as we should be interested in getting clear about justice, the moral good, beauty, and meaning. These are concepts that reflective humans want to possess and use correctly. They are part of our normative lives, and so we do better when we are right about the concepts and their applications. The second reason why epistemology is philosophically interesting is that developments in our account of knowledge influence how we pursue our other philosophical accounts. So, one's story of why one is right about, say, justice (and how others may be wrong) is one that depends on one's account of what it is to be right about these concepts and how one can demonstrate that. Epistemology, then, is not only of first-order philosophical interest, but it is of concern for second-order philosophical reasons. Views on the nature of truth and the acquisition of knowledge bear on how one sees the breadth of philosophically relevant truths and the methods of one's competitors.

This point about the two levels of philosophical import for epistemology is borne out in the way the transition from mythology to philosophy is discussed when demarcating the beginnings of the ancient philosophical traditions. The relevant transition from the complex of Hesiodic and Homeric poems to philosophical *historia* is posited on the contrast between reliance on testimony given about the gods or through those inspired by them and those who judge by reason and experience. Hesiod's *Theogony* opens with the poet relating how he met the nymphs who tell him the stories of the gods and have given him the ability to relate them accurately (*Theog.* 22-35), and Homer's two epics open with an appeal to the goddess to speak through the poet, and, by extension, the rhapsode relating the poem (*Il.* I.1-3; *Od.* I.1-10). The philosophical tradition is demarcated by a transition to human capacities to reflect upon and endorse the truths on offer. Xenophanes' critique of the revealed religious traditions concedes that independent inquiry does not

guarantee success, but we nevertheless ‘discover better’ with inquiry, as opposed to not inquiring (B 18), and Heraclitus explicitly criticizes the poetic tradition’s hold on the minds of Greeks: “Heraclitus said Homer deserved to be expelled from the contests and flogged, and Archilochus likewise” (B 42). The contrast between the two traditions is clearest in the opening lines of Parmenides’ poem, where the poet is brought up to speak with the goddess, but is given a directive: “judge by reasoning (*logos*) the much-contested examination spoken by me” (B 7). Parmenides’ philosophical program may be put into a poem, like those of the epic traditions beforehand, but the validity of its contents is one to be evaluated on the merits of its arguments, not on the divinity of its source.

Developments in epistemology and developments in philosophical method are tightly connected for the ancients. With Plato, for example, the myth of recollection in the *Meno* is both an answer to a crypto-skeptical challenge, but it is also a description of how Socrates’ method is supposed to work more generally (*Meno* 86b and *Phaedo* 99d). Aristotle’s commitment to saving the appearances is both a commitment to the manifest image and a stand against the reductivism of many of his predecessors, but it is also the statement of his broader philosophical strategy of answering most philosophical competitors (See NE VII. 1145b.3-8 and *Met* I. 985a.10-17). Beyond the classical period, this point is borne out with the Epicurean *kanon* and the injunction that philosophical reflection not extend beyond what is supported by the senses (*Ep. Herod.*, 38). The Stoics required that the *sophos* never err, so they restrict all judgment to those based on *kataleptic* impressions—namely, impressions that are true, caused by what is, and are distinctive in a way that marks them from false impressions (DL 7.47). The combination of the high standards for rational belief and the conflict over the proper criterion for the correct standards yielded the Academic and later Pyrrhonian skepticisms about both the possibility of knowledge and philosophical achievement overall (Ac 1.44 and PH 1.12).

The point of this quick overview is simply to portray the philosophical fecundity of epistemology. I think the ancients are exemplary in this respect, since with their exchanges about these respective philosophies of knowledge, they see that they are, by extension, offering critique of groundings for theories of justice, the moral good, beauty, and meaning. The essays in this volume bear out the broad consequences of the epistemic program in and between the figures prominent in ancient philosophy—views about the gods and their role in the human realm, accounts of the proper criterion for coordinating conflicting moral norms, what role



contemplation plays in a complete life, how widely the critical eye of skepticism ranges, and what one should do when that skeptical eye lands upon oneself, are all at their core epistemological questions, but they have practical and metaphilosophical consequences.

**Harald Thorsrud's** "Sextus Empiricus on the Siren Song of Reason and the Skeptical Defense of Ordinary Life" is a case that, from the Pyrrhonist's perspective, reason's deceptive influence is not merely an epistemic problem, but a practical challenge for reflective beings. Inquirers, like sailors captivated by the Sirens' song, yearn for truth and knowledge. Sextus holds that both the sirens and reason offer only empty promises, ones that bring ruin to those who follow them. Neither knowledge nor the tranquility promised by its pursuit come from this path. The skeptical view that the dogmatic programs neither provide knowledge nor yield tranquility yet seems a product of reason, too. But, as Thorsrud notes, the history of sophisms shows reason to be a trickster, stealing appearances from us, as we see with the rationalist traditions of denying motion, time, and the phenomenal world. The skeptic's skill, then (as noted at PH I.9) is not simply opposing appearances to reasons in any fashion, but in opposing those reasonings, undoing their hold on our minds. This, Thorsrud argues, is Sextus' therapeutic conclusion, one that undoes the effects of philosophical dogmatizing.

**Timothy Roche's** essay, "The Practical Life, the Contemplative Life, and the Perfect *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7-8" provides a defense of an interpretation that differs from previous readings of Aristotle's final remarks about happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Roche argues that Aristotle's final discussion of *eudaimonia* is not, as some have alleged, inconsistent with Aristotle's claims about happiness in the previous 9 books of the Ethics. Moreover, it is not an exclusively 'intellectualist,' 'inclusive end,' 'superstructure,' or 'approximation' account as others have maintained. Rather, understanding Aristotle's notions of the perfect *eudaimonia* and secondary (or second-rank) *eudaimonia* in *EN* 10 begins with the consideration that the secondary *eudaimonia* is not a life typified by any or every sort of excellent practical activity, but one typified by a specific type of excellent practical activity, namely *excellent political activity*. Once this is point is acknowledged, Roche argues that (1) for Aristotle, the perfect *eudaimonia* involves not only the exercise of theoretical wisdom, but excellent practical activity as well, (2) the contemplative life does not, and cannot, involve the type of excellent practical activity equivalent to excellent political activity, but nonetheless (3) some of the philosopher's happiness consists in a particular form of excellent practical

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activity, namely, the form of excellent practical activity exercised within the contemplative person's personal or private life, the life he lives with family, friends, and associates. Consequently, the perfect *eudaimonia* for Aristotle is not composed exclusively of contemplative activity (as intellectualist interpreters claim). And even though contemplative activity is the primary component of the philosopher's perfectly happy life, Aristotle holds that excellent practical activity makes a direct contribution to the philosopher's happiness. It does so not because happiness is inclusive of all intrinsic goods or because excellent practical activity is an approximation of the exercise of theoretical wisdom, but precisely for the reason Aristotle himself gives—the philosopher is a human being, a being whose most distinctive activity is practical in nature. The secondary *eudaimonia*, by contrast, involves the life of the practically wise and morally excellent statesman, and so on Roche's interpretation, the happiness found in both the contemplative life and the political life necessarily (though in the contemplative life only partially), consists in practically wise and morally excellent activities.

**Maureen Eckert's** "Euthyphro and the Logic of Miasma" is an account of the conflicted state of religious and moral knowledge in classical Athens. Eckert holds that this conflict is in high resolution in Plato's *Euthyphro*. In particular, it is in the puzzle case of Euthyphro prosecuting his own father for murder. Eckert argues that Euthyphro is on good ground from one perspective in holding that the pollution of a murder must be extirpated, but his case is complicated by the fact that to proceed, a son must prosecute his own father, which breaks with norms of filial piety. And so, the systems of purity and pollution conflict with that of honor and shame. Surely only one with the highest expertise in religion and morality would venture to take a strong stand in such a conflicted case, and Euthyphro famously claims that he certainly has it, or else "I should be of no use... and Euthyphro would not be superior to the majority of all men" (5a). It seems that in Euthyphro's case, like the case of conflict between two models of justice in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, it is not so easily arbitrated. In fact, given the way the conflict is portrayed in both Plato's *Euthyphro* and Aeschylus's *Eumenides* (the third of the three in the *Oresteia* trilogy), any of the decisions will have significant difficulty being seen as legitimate by opponents. Here, Eckert holds that the Athenian legal system would need an independent conception of pollution and piety to break the intellectual conflict. The problem, though, is that for Euthyphro, Athena does not arrive *deus ex machina* to resolve the tension between the sets of norms, as she does for Orestes in the *Oresteia*. As

Eckert assesses the situation, “[as] long as the legal system is intertwined with religion, nothing can be settled.”

**Allysson V.L. Rocha's** “Boundless Skepticism and the Five Modes” makes the case that a form of general skepticism is derivable from the interplay between two themes in Sextus Empiricus's Five Modes. In general, the skeptic's arguments are either dialectically tied to their interlocutors, or they are not. If they are tied to their interlocutors, the skeptical conclusions do not risk self-refutation, but they will not yield general conclusions—they are only bad consequences for particular views about knowledge. If the skeptical arguments are not dialectically tied, they are more general, freestanding, skeptical conclusions. But they then risk the problem of self-refutation, as it seems the skeptic proves something with the arguments and the skeptic must have done so with a background theory of knowledge. Rocha's solution is to use Sextus' dialectical tropes as a model for more general conclusions. What Rocha calls the *subjective constraints of interpretation*—that the skeptical modes are applied only to topics that individual skeptics are investigating—is how to stay true to the dialectical orientation of Sextus' skepticism. However, the modes themselves can be applied to whatever it is said about the subject the individual skeptic attends to, and so, even if one is constrained by context for any particular suspension, these are instances of a more general pattern, identified by the Five Modes as a technique for skeptical challenge. The consequence, as Rocha takes it, is that skepticism is limited by the context of use and the interests of the skeptics who practice skepticism's strategies, but this is because the Five Modes, as types of arguments, are more general than their limited range of individual tokens.

**Daniel Larkin's** “A Gift from the Gods: Socratic Knowledge in Plato's Late Dialogues” is a case for centralizing divine inspiration in the theories of knowledge on display in Plato's later dialogues, such as the *Laws*, *Sophist*, and *Philebus*. Importantly, the role of inspiration in the early and middle dialogues is quite familiar—Socrates has a *daimon*, the *kalliopolis* of the *Republic* follows the dictates of the Delphic Oracles, and the doctrine of recollection of the *Meno* is one revealed by ‘priests and priestesses’ giving an account of their practice. Larkin's argument is that divine inspiration plays a similar role in the later dialogues, but this role is unique in that the Eleatic Stranger of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* and the Athenian of the *Laws* integrate reported divine sources of knowledge into their epistemic and political programs. In the *Laws*, the poets are hailed as divinely inspired, so they can be reliable for their histories. In the *Philebus*, Socrates regularly appeals to the gods for help in deploying his method—in this case, of collection and division (18b).

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Socrates further announces that the gods sent him to keep inquiry alive among humans (*Philebus* 20b), and he reports that the question of the dialogue (namely, whether pleasure alone is a good) was revealed by the gods, too. Larkin concludes that Socrates' wisdom (and the wisdom required to efficiently run a state), even in the later dialogues, is in large part a product of divine dispensation.

**Brian Ribeiro** argues for a radically skeptical interpretation of Cicero's philosophy of religion, what he identifies as an early form of orthopraxic skeptical fideism. The skeptical fideist tradition, associated with Montaigne, Pascal, and Bayle as its early modern proponents, has many plausible ancient antecedents. Socratic claims of ignorance combined with Socrates' stories of what is revealed to him by religious resources (e.g., the Delphic Oracle, recommendations of his *daimon*, reports from religious practitioners about the journey of souls before and after life) is a tempting example. However, Ribeiro is reticent to attribute a full-throated skepticism to Socrates, instead more an inquiring attitude. Alternately, Cicero's Cotta in *De Natura Deorum*, representing the skeptical Academy in critical exchange with Stoic and Epicurean theologies, counts easily as a skeptic. And Cotta, further, is an enthusiastic participant in Roman religion—in fact, he's a *pontifex* (a keeper of sacred rights and official of state religious ceremonies). Ribeiro's view, then, is that Cotta, as a skeptic, holds that though religion's doxastic commitments do not pass critical scrutiny, its practical benefits are still worth pursuing and worth the preservation of the institutions of ceremony. And so, though a skeptic, Ribeiro holds, Cotta is still committed to the orthopraxy of his Roman civic religion. He is, as Ribeiro terms him, an *Academic pontifex*.

**Andrew Cling** argues that Meno's Paradox is an instance of the problem of the regress of reasons. The regress problem arises in this particular case of Meno's challenge by the requirement that all knowledge-about something requires prior knowledge of what that thing is. The regress, then, is one for knowledge *acquisition*, and so it is primarily a problem for going from not knowing anything about something to knowing something about it. If we assume that our knowledge is the product of learning and inquiry (coming to know from ignorance), then it seems that knowledge is impossible. Given this presentation of the regress arising from knowledge-acquisition, the Platonic solution of nativism (that acquisition is only an illusion—we are actually *recollecting these things*) is a clear answer to the challenge. Given that this puzzle is stated as a version of the problem of the transition from non-being to being, Cling identifies an Eleatic influence in the background—that

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Plato's anti-skeptical theory of knowledge is an expression of a deeper Eleatic rationalism.



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

Harald THORSRUD

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

KEYWORDS: Pyrrhonian skepticism, inquiry, dialectic, deception

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

## I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>13</sup> Brunschwig, “Formula,” 256.

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

## II

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>15</sup> Annas and Barnes, *Outlines*, 135.

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

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

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

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

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

### III

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

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>20</sup> Blank, *Grammarians*, 212-13.

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

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

#### IV

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>26</sup> Annas and Barnes, *Outlines*, 181.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>27</sup> Annas and Barnes, *Outlines*, 137.

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

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

## V

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



**THE PRACTICAL LIFE,  
THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE,  
AND THE PERFECT *EUDAIMONIA*  
IN ARISTOTLE'S  
*NICOMACHEAN ETHICS* 10.7-8**

Timothy ROCHE

ABSTRACT: Two views continue to be defended today. One is that the account of *eudaimonia* in *EN 10* is *inconsistent* with claims made about it in other books of the work. The other view is that the account in *EN 10* is consistent with other claims made in the other books because Aristotle presents one account of perfect *eudaimonia* by portraying it as consisting solely in contemplative activity. I call this view the intellectualist interpretation. I then argue that neither view is correct because although Aristotle's position is consistent, he does not hold that the perfect *eudaimonia* for a human being involves nothing but excellent theoretical activity. His philosopher possesses and exercises the moral excellences and practical wisdom and so some portion of his happiness consists in these activities as well as contemplative activity.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle, Contemplation, Intellectual Virtue, *Eudaimonia*

*Nicomachean Ethics* (*EN*) 10.7-8 contains Aristotle's final remarks in this work about his view of the nature of happiness (*eudaimonia*). The account relies on an extended treatment of the value of the theoretical or contemplative life as compared to the value of the practical or political life. I hope to show that a careful examination of these final chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics* helps to reveal that there is an overlooked but reasonable alternative to the ways in which the majority of researchers today understand the import of Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia* in *EN 10*. Since it does not seem to be an exaggeration to say that the texts of the *Nicomachean Ethics* discussed in this paper have received as much or more attention in the past 50 years as any other texts of ancient Greek philosophy, it will not be possible in the space of the paper both to defend my interpretation of the texts and demonstrate how and why it should be judged to be a more acceptable interpretation than the numerous and distinct views currently on offer. I will, however, provide

some general remarks about how the view favored here differs from the *kinds* of interpretation that most scholars support today and then leave it to the reader to decide whether the position I defend does or does not square better with their own reading of Aristotle.

For generations scholars have been divided over precisely how to interpret what Aristotle says about *eudaimonia* in *EN* 10 and how to relate his account of it here to what he says or implies about it in the other books of the *EN*. Since the debate is so familiar, it would be tedious, if not impossible, to provide all of the details of its history here. But it will be useful for the purpose of explaining my position to describe, briefly, five views that have been most frequently defended. One is that the argument of 10.7-8 is inconsistent with the claims made about *eudaimonia* in the other books of the treatise.<sup>1</sup> The reasons offered for this judgement differ somewhat from one interpreter to another, but the following consideration is one that is frequently advanced by those who take the *EN* to end with an incoherent theory of the human good. In an earlier paper, Christopher Rowe expressed the point this way:

X.7... proposes a life exclusively devoted to *theōria*, which it directly contrasts with the life of practical activity, and of the exercise of the practical *aretai*. Yet it may be said at once that this position is wholly anomalous. ... [A]s is obvious, nearly the whole of the rest of the *EN* has centred on the practical *aretai* which are here so cavalierly devalued, on the apparent understanding that these are at least central to *eudaimonia*; and indeed we find Aristotle resuming the same standpoint, without apology, in the final chapter of book X, immediately after rounding off his remarks on the superiority of the theoretical life at the end of chapter 8. ... [I]t appears that Aristotle thinks it perfectly reasonable to argue simultaneously that practical activity of the right kind is essential to *eudaimonia*, and that *eudaimonia* really—and exclusively—consists in theoretical activity. How can that be?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 373-377; Jonathan Lear, *The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 309-320; Christopher Rowe, "The Good for Man in Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*," in *Studi sull'etica di Aristotele*, ed. Antonina M. Alberti (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1990), 193-225, especially 217.

<sup>2</sup> Rowe, "The Good for Man," 218. Rowe has now abandoned this view and accepted an interpretation that is similar to the one we find in Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). My own interpretation is similar to Broadie's, so I am very happy to know that Rowe, an eminent scholar, now accepts an interpretation of Aristotle close to the one I have been defending for some years now. See his "The Best Life According to Aristotle (and Plato): A Reconsideration," in *Theoria: Studies on the Status and Meaning of Contemplation in Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Pierre Destrée and Marco Zingano (Louvain-La-Neuve: Peeters, 2014), 273-



## The Practical Life, the Contemplative Life, and the Perfect *Eudaimonia*

The complaint here is that in numerous passages throughout the *EN*, Aristotle clearly states or implies that excellent practical activity (i.e., practically wise and morally virtuous activity) is, at the very least, a constituent of the highest good for human beings, an essential component of human *eudaimonia*. But in 10.7-8, the highest human good, the perfect or complete happiness, seems to turn out to be constituted by contemplative activity (*theōria*) alone. Let us call this view the Inconsistency Interpretation.

Other interpreters, maintain that the argument of book 10 *is* consistent with the other parts of the *EN*.<sup>3</sup> They hold that book 10 defends an Intellectualist Conception of *eudaimonia*, but it is an intellectualist position that coheres well with the rest of the treatise. In my view, Kraut<sup>4</sup> and Richardson Lear<sup>5</sup> have produced the most ingenious and detailed defenses of this sort of reading, so in what follows I will take abstract and generalized versions of their positions to represent what I am calling the Intellectualist Interpretation. According to the view, Aristotle believes, throughout the *EN*, that (1) the best life for a human being is contemplative or philosophical activity engaged in within a complete and substantial period of life; (2) the philosopher rightly takes the practical virtues to be intrinsic goods, and he fully possesses these virtues himself; (3) the philosopher correctly judges that the exercise of the practical virtues does not constitute any part of his *eudaimonia*, for he also correctly judges that his *eudaimonia* consists in contemplation alone; but (4) he recognizes, nevertheless, that a life whose ultimate end consists in the exercise of

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<sup>3</sup> Among these interpreters, see Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Robert Heinaman, "Eudaimonia and Self-sufficiency in the Nicomachean Ethics", *Phronesis*, Vol. 33, no. 1 (1988): 31-53; Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); C.D.C. Reeve, *Practices of Reason: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Clarendon Press, 1995), Joachim Aufderheide, "The Content of Happiness: a New Case for *Theōria*", in *The Highest Good in Aristotle and Kant*, ed. Joachim Aufderheide and Ralf M. Bader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); David Charles, "Aristotle on Well-Being and Intellectual Contemplation," *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 73*, no. 1 (1999): 205-223; John M. Cooper, "Plato and Aristotle on 'Finality' and 'Sufficiency'," in *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good: Essays on Ancient Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 270-308; Gavin Lawrence, "Snakes in Paradise: Problems in the Ideal Life", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XLIII Supplement (2005): 126-165 and David Roochnik, "Aristotle's Defense of the Theoretical Life," *Review of Metaphysics*, 61, no. 4 (2008): 711-735.

<sup>4</sup> Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*.

<sup>5</sup> Richardson Lear, *Happy Lives and the Highest Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

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the practical virtues is good enough to count as a happy life, for it involves an excellent use of reason and aims at truth, and (5) the exercise of the practical virtues causally promotes (Kraut) or is an approximation of the philosopher's own superbly rational life (Richardson Lear).<sup>6</sup>

A third interpretation maintains that *eudaimonia* consists in the totality of intrinsic goods, including both excellent practical activity as well as excellent theoretical activity. The original defender of this 'inclusive end' view was John Ackrill (cf. his "Aristotle on Eudaimonia"); a less extreme variant of this kind of interpretation was proposed by David Keyt.<sup>7</sup> He argued that *eudaimonia*, for Aristotle, does not consist in the totality of intrinsic goods, but only in both excellent contemplative activity and excellent practical activity. He called this the 'superstructure' view. My interpretation is similar to Keyt's in some ways and very different in other ways.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Richardson Lear, *Happy Lives*, presents a detailed account of how she thinks the notion of teleological approximation works inside and outside of the *EN*. My view is that there is scant evidence that Aristotle believed, in the *EN*, that excellent practical activities are good (and indeed intrinsically good) *because* they approximate excellent theoretical activities. First, I can find no unquestionable textual support for this position in *EN* 10 or elsewhere in the *EN*. In fact, Richardson Lear concedes this point (p. 90) but oddly is not troubled by it. Second, although she concedes that Aristotle holds that excellent practical activities, such as the exercise of the moral virtues, are intrinsically valuable, her interpretation implies that the value of such activities *derives from* the value they inherit from excellent theoretical activity. But it is entirely unclear how, on her interpretation, we are to understand how the value of excellent practical activities can be intrinsic to them rather than extrinsic to them. A further objection to Richardson Lear's position is that it proves too much: the crafts, according to Aristotle, involve reason and truthfulness too (*EN* 6.3, 1139b14-17 and 6.4, 1140a20-21) and therefore should also approximate excellent theoretical activity and thus constitute some form of *eudaimonia*. But Aristotle, we know, never suggests such a thing. On the contrary, in the *Politics*, he makes it clear that those who occupy themselves with the crafts are incapable of virtue and therefore *eudaimonia* (7.9, 1328b39ff., 1329a19-21, 8.2, 1337b8-11).

<sup>7</sup> "Intellectualism in Aristotle," in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, vol. 2, ed. J.P. Anton and A. Preus (Albany, New York SUNY Press, 1983), 364-387. For Ackrill's paper, see *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. A. O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 15-34.

<sup>8</sup> Keyt believed that the references to a perfect and secondary *eudaimonia* in *EN* 10 were to be understood as different aspects of a single conception of *eudaimonia*. I think this is incorrect and Aristotle means what he says: there are two different types of *eudaimonia*. On the other hand, I believe that the perfectly happy life, for Aristotle, includes not only contemplative activity but excellent moral activity as well, and so the perfectly happy life captures much of what Keyt regarded as the alleged single type of happy life he thought Aristotle was discussing in *EN* 10.

## The Practical Life, the Contemplative Life, and the Perfect *Eudaimonia*

A recent interpretation may be distinct from those already considered, but it is difficult to say since it has some features that are similar to other views that have been defended. The position holds that contemplation is a divine good while morally excellent and politically wise activity is a purely human good. Those who can incorporate both types of activity in their lives will realize the perfect *eudaimonia* whereas those who can only achieve a life organized around excellent political activity can achieve only the secondary form of *eudaimonia*.<sup>9</sup>

Although I disagree, in some way or other, with all of the foregoing interpretations, my view is much closer to the interpretations of Broadie,<sup>10</sup> Bush<sup>11</sup> and Dahl<sup>12</sup> than any of the others. My disagreement with Broadie, Bush, and Dahl has to do primarily with their inclusion of grand scale excellent political activity into the perfectly *eudaimon* life (which I think is inconsistent with Aristotle's claim that the contemplative life is more self-sufficient than the political life). But I agree with these interpreters, against others, that some form of practically excellent activity must be a component of the perfectly happy human life.

It is clear that both the Inconsistency Interpretation and the Intellectualist Interpretation share the view that in *EN* 10 Aristotle believes that the happiness of the philosopher can be constituted only by contemplative activity. However, I believe that there are good reasons to question this view and hold instead that some part of the happiness found in the life of Aristotle's philosopher is constituted by practically wise and morally virtuous activities. Note, first, that when Aristotle concludes his function argument in *EN* 1.7, he adds that excellent activity must occur over a complete life in order for *eudaimonia* to be achieved (a complete life is not necessarily a life that involves a continuity of happiness or one that is typically lengthy since *EN* 1.8-11 reveals that one can lose and regain one's happiness and one's relatively short adult life might be a happy one). Consequently, *eudaimonia cannot* consist merely in any episodes of particular sorts of excellent activity. It must involve excellent activity in a complete life, as Broadie and Dahl have shown.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This is the interpretation offered by Bush.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, and Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe, *Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Bush, "Divine and Human Happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*," *Philosophical Review* 117, no. 1 (2008): 49-75.

<sup>12</sup> Dahl, N. O. "Contemplation and eudaimonia in the *Nicomachean Ethics*," in *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. A Critical Guide*, ed. Jon Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> See Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, and Dahl, "Contemplation and *Eudaimonia*".

Furthermore, to understand what Aristotle is up to in *EN*10, it is necessary to recall what was said earlier in book 1. In both *EN* 1 and *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*) 1, Aristotle refers to what seems to have been a traditional, but still current, starting-point for discussions about the nature of the human good or *eudaimonia*. This is the renowned image of the three prominent or most favored types of life: “we see three lives”, he says, “which all who have the resources choose to live, the political [life], the philosophical [life], and the [life] of enjoyment (*politikon*, *philosophon*, *apolaustikon*).<sup>14</sup> With each of these lives Aristotle associates a particular good an agent’s desire for which, and pursuit of which, characterizes the life, and one or another historical figure whose life can be subsumed under one of the three headings. Thus, the apolaustic life is typified by the pursuit of, and desire for, bodily pleasure and play, and Aristotle points to both the Assyrian king Sardanapallus and a certain Smindyrides of Sybara as examples of those who pursued such a life. The good that is of major concern in the political life turns out to be a certain form of excellent practical activity, providing that we are talking about a good or “true” political life (otherwise ends such money, honor, and gaining unfair advantage over others are associated with this life).<sup>15</sup> Aristotle does not explicitly connect a particular individual with the political life in his discussions of the three lives. However, remarks made elsewhere indicate that he would count such men as Solon and Pericles among those who had lived good lives of this type.<sup>16</sup> The philosophical or theoretical life is typified by a concern with the good of contemplative wisdom. Aristotle’s favorite example of a person who had lived the philosophical life is Anaxagoras. Like Aristotle himself, Anaxagoras abandoned his life as a citizen of his native city<sup>17</sup> in order to study philosophy in the city of Athens as a *metoikos* (*metic*, resident alien). According to the biographical tradition, Anaxagoras spent about thirty years in Athens where he became a friend and teacher of Pericles. However, he fled Athens when charges of impiety and Medism were brought against him by some of Pericles’ political enemies. He then took up residence in the city of Lampsacus<sup>18</sup>, where he continued to engage in philosophical contemplation until his death. According to Aristotle, despite having the status of a *xenos* (guest-friend) in

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<sup>14</sup> *EE* 1.4, 1215a35–b1; cf. *EN* 1.5, 1095b14–1096a5.

<sup>15</sup> See *EN* 1.13, 1102a7–10; cf. *EN* 1.9, 1099b28–32, *EE* 1216a24–27.

<sup>16</sup> Pericles: *EN* 6.5, 1140b7–11; Solon: *EN* 10.9, 1179a9–13 where Aristotle uses Solon’s testimony to confirm his argument. Aristotle implies that he takes Solon to be wise at a16–17.

<sup>17</sup> Clazomenae (now Urla).

<sup>18</sup> Present day Lapseki.

the city, the people of Lampsacus gave him a public burial in honor of his theoretical wisdom.<sup>19</sup>

I believe the image of the three favored types of life explains the structure of the argument we find at the end of the *EN*, specifically the argument that runs from chapters 6 through 8 of book 10. At the beginning of *EN* 10.6, Aristotle says: “We have discussed matters pertaining to the virtues, friendships, and pleasures. It remains for us to discuss *eudaimonia* in outline.”<sup>20</sup> In 10.6, Aristotle discusses and refutes the view that *eudaimonia* consists in a life devoted to the pleasures of play or amusement; after this, in 10.7-8, he argues that *theōria* is (or is the central component of) the perfect or complete happiness (*hē teleia eudaimonia*) and thus the life of the intellect (*ho kata ton noun bios*) is the happiest life for a human being.<sup>21</sup> He contrasts this philosophical life with one he calls “the life in accordance with the other excellence” (*ho kata tēn allēn aretēn*: *EN* 10.8, 1178a9), but maintains that the latter type of life deserves to be called happy as well, though only in a secondary way (*deuterōs*). I propose that the life that is happy in a secondary way is a certain species of the practical life, *viz.*, an excellent political life. Unless this is correct, it is difficult to see how Aristotle can be understood to conclude his account of *eudaimonia* in the *EN* with his answer to the question raised in book 1: which of the three favored types of life is happy? And if the life in accordance with the other excellence is not a life of excellent political activity, then what might it be? To say that it is a life devoted to the exercise of the practical excellences *simpliciter*, would seem to require us to embrace the inconsistency interpretation. For on this reading, Aristotle would be contrasting the contemplative life with a life of morally excellent and practically wise activities, and then in elevating the contemplative life above *this* life, he would indicate that there is a form of human happiness that can be enjoyed by a person bereft of moral excellence and practical wisdom. This seems to be an intolerable result and thus one we should avoid embracing unless an alternative interpretation proves to be implausible.

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<sup>19</sup> *Rh.* 2.23, 1398b16-17.

<sup>20</sup> 1176a30-32.

<sup>21</sup> *EN* 10.7, 1177b24-25, 1178a6-8. By saying that *theōria* is the perfect happiness I take Aristotle to mean that contemplation is the good that typifies the life that best or most fully satisfies the features that are associated with a happy life (cf. Broadie, 1991). It is the highest or most desirable aim of the person to whom we ascribe supreme or unqualified happiness. However, it is not the only aim of such a person. As I argue in the paper, excellent practical activity is also a fundamental aim of the person living the supremely happy life. Cf. note 40.

However, there do appear to be passages throughout 10. 7-8 that imply a sharp contrast not merely between a philosophical life and a good political life, but a philosophical life and *any* life that counts as an excellent practical one. For example, Aristotle maintains that one reason to equate the perfect *eudaimonia* with *theōria* is that *theōria* is the most self-sufficient activity. He defends his claim with the following remarks:

The wise man, no less than the just one and all the rest, requires the necessities of life; but, given an adequate supply of these, the just man also needs people with and towards whom he can perform just actions, and similarly with the temperate man, the brave man, and each of the others; but the wise man can engage in contemplation by himself, and the wiser he is, the more he can do it. No doubt he does it better with the help of fellow workers; but for all that he is the most self-sufficient of men.<sup>22</sup>

It seems clear that this passage, and others like them,<sup>23</sup> have helped to produce Christopher Rowe's earlier view that *EN*10.7 "...proposes a life exclusively devoted to *theōria*, which it directly contrasts with *the life of practical activity*, and of *the exercise of the practical aretai*" (quoted above, with my emphases).<sup>24</sup> But do these passages show that the philosophical life is being distinguished from *any life that counts as a good practical life*? Moreover, do they suggest that none of the happiness within the philosophical life can be constituted by excellent practical activity? My contention is that they do not.

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<sup>22</sup> 1177a28-b1; cf. 1178a28-34.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Aristotle distinguishes between "practical [activities]" and "contemplating" (at 1177b2-4) and between "actions in accordance with the [practical] excellences" and the "activity of the [theoretical] intellect" (at 1177b16-20). At the beginning of 10.8 Aristotle says that "the [life] in accordance with the other excellence will be happy in a secondary way, because the activities in accordance with it are human" (1178a9-10); he then defends the claim that activities in accordance with the "other virtue" are human by arguing that "just and brave acts and the others in accordance with the excellences in regard to our dealings with one another...and in the feelings too...all appear to be human" (1178a10-14). After this, Aristotle maintains, as he did in book 6, that the possession of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) entails the possession of the moral excellences, and vice versa (1178a16-22). So it certainly looks as if the "other excellence" Aristotle is distinguishing here from theoretical wisdom is the totality of the practical excellences—*phronēsis* and the *ēthikai aretai*.

<sup>24</sup> Rowe now has accepted Broadie's interpretation. See Christopher J. Rowe, "The Best Life According to Aristotle (and Plato). A Reconsideration," in *The Ways of Life in Classical Political Philosophy*, ed. F.L. Lisi (Madrid: Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin, 2004), 121-133.

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In what is nearly the first half of 10.7,<sup>25</sup> Aristotle does contrast contemplation with excellent practical activity with respect to various features that are associated with *eudaimonia*. He argues *either* that some of these features may be ascribed to *theōria* but not to excellent practical activities *or* that some of them apply to *theōria* to a greater degree than they apply to excellent practical activities. After presenting a number of arguments along these lines, Aristotle considers another point that helps move his discussion forward. He writes:

*Eudaimonia* seems to be [found in] leisure (*scholē*), for we occupy ourselves so that we may have leisure and we make war so that we may bring about peace. Now the activity of the practical virtues occurs in politics or war, and actions with respect these [affairs] seem to be without leisure (*ascholos*). Military actions are completely so.... But the activity of the politician (*ho politikos*) is also without leisure...Therefore...among the actions in accordance with the virtues those in politics and war are pre-eminently fine and great (*kallos kai megethos*); but they are without leisure....<sup>26</sup>

Aristotle goes on to argue that contemplation, rather than political activity, is (or is more closely) linked with leisure, self-sufficiency, and “the other things assigned to the supremely happy person”.<sup>27</sup> He then infers that “the perfect happiness for a human being will be this [activity]”.<sup>28</sup>

I have said that the life that Aristotle calls happy “in a secondary way” is the good *political life* and not merely any life in which good *practical* activity is included as an aim. One reason to accept this interpretation has now surfaced. For Aristotle has just inferred that *theōria* is the perfect *eudaimonia* from the fact that it is *theōria*, rather than *political activity*, that is most closely associated with the attributes that attach to being supremely happy. Aristotle calls the life typified by *theōria* “the life of the intellect.” But, in 10.7-8, the life that is “happy in a secondary way” is the only life that Aristotle contrasts with the life of the intellect. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that it is good political activity that typifies the life that is happy in a secondary way.<sup>29</sup> A passage in 10.8 supplies further support for this conclusion. Aristotle writes:

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<sup>25</sup> 1177a12-b4.

<sup>26</sup> 1177b4-18.

<sup>27</sup> 1177b18-24.

<sup>28</sup> 1177b24-25: *hē teleia eudaimonia autē an eiē anthropōu*.

<sup>29</sup> At this point one might wonder why Aristotle seems to compare contemplation to excellent practical activity quite generally if his intention is to distinguish the philosophical life from an excellent *political life*. In reply to this question, I will note, first, that in the *Politics* Aristotle uses

The virtues of the composite are human; thus both the life and the happiness in accordance with these [are human]. But the happiness of the intellect is separate. ...It would seem, also, to stand in little need of external resources or less than [the happiness/the virtue?] of character (*tēs ēthikēs*). For both require the necessities [of life] and in equal measure, even if the politician (*politikos*) labors more about the body and things of that sort. For in this there may be little difference. But with respect to their activities, there will be a great difference.<sup>30</sup>

Although there are questions about how to translate and interpret much of this notorious passage, here we need only focus on one obvious fact about it: there is a smooth transition in the passage from talk about the external resources needed to engage in activities expressing an excellent character (*ho ēthikos*) to talk about the activities of the politician. The best explanation for this fact, I think, is that Aristotle is taking an excellent political life to be the specific type of excellent practical life to which he is comparing the philosophical life.

That Aristotle regards the political life as a species of the practical life is beyond question. In *EN* 6.8, he claims that *politikē* (the virtue of the excellent politician) is one form of *phronēsis*. It is practical wisdom operating in regard to the good of the *polis* and is thus distinguished from the use of practical wisdom in regard to the good of the self or the individual alone (and to which popular discourse has incorrectly restricted the term). *Politikē*, as Aristotle understands it, is the intellectual virtue that is exercised in the practical domains of legislation, deliberation, and judicature.<sup>31</sup> In the *Politics*, Aristotle tells us that an excellent ruler is good and is practically wise (*phronimos*)<sup>32</sup>; in fact, he declares that “*phronēsis* is the only distinctive virtue (*idios aretē*) of the ruler.”<sup>33</sup> Moreover, he claims that a

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the expressions “political life” and “practical life” interchangeably (cf. *Pol.* 7. 2, 1324a27). Apparently, the debate between advocates of the political life and advocates of the philosophical life was typically referred to as a debate between proponents of the practical life and proponents of the philosophical life (see Timothy Roche, “The Private Moral Life of Aristotle’s Philosopher: A Defense of a Non-Intellectualist Interpretation of Nicomachean Ethics 10.7-8,” in *Contemplation in Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Pierre Destrée and Marco Zingano (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 222ff.) for additional evidence about the manner in which this debate was framed). Secondly, Aristotle’s own conception of a good political life can easily explain why he thinks of it as a life in accordance with the practical virtues. In particular, he thinks of political virtue as a certain form of practical wisdom. See pp. 40-41.

<sup>30</sup> 1178a20-28.

<sup>31</sup> 1141b23-1142a10.

<sup>32</sup> 3.4, 1277a13-15.

<sup>33</sup> 1277b25-26.



ruler must have complete moral excellence,<sup>34</sup> a point we would expect him to make if the *Politics* is consistent with the *EN* on the relationship between practical wisdom and moral excellence. In Aristotle's view, then, the excellent politician is involved in the project of realizing not merely his own personal good but the good for his entire *polis*.<sup>35</sup> Thus, Aristotle's good politician exercises the practical excellences, but he does so on a grand scale. He engages in virtuous activity in the public arena and his actions are for the sake of the well being of his entire political community. This is why Aristotle believes that excellent political actions are "pre-eminently fine and great" (*kallos kai megethos*; cf. quoted passage on p. 39). It is also part of the explanation for why Aristotle sometimes writes as if he is contrasting the theoretical life with any life devoted to morally excellent and practically wise activities.<sup>36</sup> For the morally excellent and practically wise activities that can serve as the primary component of a happy life must be pre-eminently fine and great to have such a consequential implication for a human life.

However, the fact that virtuous political actions are pre-eminently fine and great actions implies that a political life must be both less self-sufficient than, and less leisurely than, a philosophical life. Aristotle tells us that "for actions many things are needed, and the greater and finer [the actions] the more numerous are the things [needed]".<sup>37</sup> The politician, in order to be successful, must be concerned with his own possession and regular use of a considerable number of external goods, such as wealth, political friends, honor, power, etc. He also needs to be concerned with acquiring external goods for his *polis*, for he must see to it that the citizens of his *polis* have an opportunity to realize as much happiness for themselves as is possible given their natures and the conditions that have shaped their political system.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> 1.13, 1260a17-18.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. 1.2, 1094b7-10, 1.9, 1099b28-32, 1.13, 1102a7-10.

<sup>36</sup> The other elements of the explanation have to do first, with the longstanding dispute between the advocates of the political life (understood as a life of *praxis*) and the advocates of the philosophical life (understood as a life of *theoria* or the life of the spectator). Cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 484c-486d, 500c1-d4, *Republic* 592a3-b4, *Theaetetus* 172c-177b. Second, the fundamental component of a happy life is a certain sort of action or activity for Aristotle. Since excellent political activity involves certain sorts of practically wise, just, magnificent, even-tempered acts, etc. it is easy to appear to refer to practical activity in general rather than the more specific activity of politics when discussing the excellent political life.

<sup>37</sup> 1178b1-3: *pros de tas praxeis pollōn deitai kai osō an meizous kai kallious*.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *EN* 1094a26-1094b11, 1099b28-32, 1102a7-10, 1129b14-17, 1130b23-29, 1160a8-14, 1163b5-12, *Pol.* 1280b29-1281a8, 1282b14-18, 7.5-6, 8-9 (esp. 1329a17-26), 10-12, 13 (esp. 1332a7-32).

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Happiness for a *polis*, like happiness for an individual, depends upon an adequate supply of external goods.<sup>39</sup> The politician must do whatever he can to help his *polis* to acquire, preserve, and properly employ such goods. Thus, the politician's life is wrapped up with the pursuit of external goods in a way that the philosopher's life is not.

But the politician's dependence on, and concern with, a large number of external goods reveals that Aristotle's philosophical life cannot be a political life as well (at least it is unlikely to be so within deviant political regimes where the extensive concern with external goods and the demands of political office may be so time-consuming and complex as to preclude rigorous and sustained theoretical activity). If Aristotle were to take his philosopher to live a political life as well as a philosophical life, then he could not say, as he does, that the philosopher enjoys a greater degree of self-sufficiency and leisure than the politician enjoys. For any lack of self-sufficiency and leisure that attaches to the political life would then attach equally to the philosophical life, and the contrast between the two lives, and hence an important reason for ranking the philosophical life as happier than the political life, would be obliterated. It is on this point that my interpretation must be distinguished from those advocated by Broadie,<sup>40</sup> Bush,<sup>41</sup> and Dahl.<sup>42</sup>

However, Aristotle makes it perfectly clear that his philosopher does aim at excellent practical activity. He tells us that in so far as a philosopher is "a human being and lives with many others, he chooses to act in accordance with virtue; for he will need those sorts of things [i.e., external goods] towards living a human life".<sup>43</sup> Aristotle is claiming here that the philosopher will choose to act in accordance with the moral virtues and therefore will also pursue the external goods that are needed to exercise those virtues, such as money, for the sake of acting generously and justly, strength, for the sake of acting bravely, and opportunity, for the sake of acting temperately.<sup>44</sup> In fact, Aristotle implies that the philosopher will choose to pursue these external goods even though his attention to them can be regarded as impediments (*empodia*) to his contemplative activity.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> See, for example, *EN* 1099a31-b7, *Pol.* 1329a17-19, 1323a40-41, 1332a7-29.

<sup>40</sup> Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*.

<sup>41</sup> Bush, "Divine and Human Happiness."

<sup>42</sup> Dahl, "Contemplation and *Eudaimonia*."

<sup>43</sup> 1178b5-7.

<sup>44</sup> 1178a28-34.

<sup>45</sup> 1178b3-5.

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If the philosopher engages in excellent practical activity, but does not do so as a good politician (i.e., as a person who holds political office and acts in accordance with the practical virtues for the sake of the common benefit of the citizens of his *polis*), then he must do so in the context of his *private* life. His excellent practical activities for the most part will be performed with, and directed towards, his family, friends, and associates.<sup>46</sup> But now two questions arise. First, is book 10 implying that the philosopher will possess and exercise the practical virtues or is it merely indicating that the philosopher will perform actions that are compatible with the practical virtues, virtues that he does *not* possess?<sup>47</sup> And second, will the philosopher's good practical activity actually *constitute* any happiness within his life, or does it only contribute to his happiness in the manner of an instrumental means? My position is that Aristotle's philosopher will possess the practical virtues and his exercise of these virtues will constitute some of the happiness in his life. I cannot fully defend these claims here (because that would require far ranging discussions of other parts of Aristotle's moral and political philosophy than would

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<sup>46</sup> On this interpretation, the philosopher will pursue external goods in order to engage in excellent practical activity beyond what is strictly necessary for his contemplation. Therefore, he will enjoy a lesser degree of self-sufficiency and leisure than he would have had if he had engaged in practical activity only to secure the external goods required for his contemplation. This does not generate the problem alluded to above, viz., that on such a reading the contrast between "the life of the intellect" and "the life in accordance with the other excellence" would be effaced. For "the life of the intellect" properly understood includes the exercise of the practical excellences almost exclusively within the domain of the philosopher's private affairs, whereas "the life in accordance with the other excellence" involves the exercise of the practical excellences on a grand scale. Since the political life involves a greater dependence upon external goods than the life of the intellect properly understood (i.e., a philosophical life that includes the exercise of excellent practical activities in the *private* domain), it remains less self-sufficient and less leisurely than the life of the intellect.

<sup>47</sup> John Cooper once held the view that Aristotle's philosopher will engage in action that is compatible with moral excellence, but not action that *expresses*, or is a genuine exercise of, the state of moral excellence. Cooper held this view because he thought that "anyone who organizes his life from the intellectualist outlook cannot care about such actions in the way a truly just or temperate or liberal man does." He claimed that Aristotle's philosopher "will not possess the social virtues, or any other virtues, because he will lack the kind of commitment to this kind of activity that is an essential characteristic of the virtuous person" (*Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 164). But Cooper abandoned this reading and the majority of contemporary proponents of the intellectualist interpretation have rejected it as well. (Recently, however, he appears to have leaned somewhat back towards the more extreme form of the intellectualist view. See Cooper, "Plato and Aristotle on 'Finality'".)

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be possible within the limits of this paper) but I will attempt to explain them more fully and present some of my reasons for making them.

First, consider the following passage from book 10:

But being a human being he [the person who engages in *theōria* will also need external prosperity; for his nature is not self-sufficient for contemplation, but his body also must be healthy, and food and other attention must be provided. Still, even if it is not possible to be supremely happy without the external goods, one must not think that he who is to be happy will need many things or great things (*pollōn kai megalōn*). For self-sufficiency and action do not depend on excess and it is possible to perform fine actions (*prattein ta kala*) even if one does not rule earth and sea; for even from moderate powers one can act in accordance with virtue. This is plain to see; for private persons (*hoi idiōtai*) seem to perform decent actions (*ta epieikē prattein*) not less but even more than those in positions of power (*dunastai*). It is enough to possess this much; for the life of the person who is active in accordance with excellence will be happy.<sup>48</sup>

The final lines of the passage imply that private persons who perform decent actions achieve happiness exactly because their lives are “active in accordance with excellence.” The language of the passage here makes it evident that by “excellence” Aristotle means moral excellence. Although he does not explicitly say that the private persons he is referring to actually have the moral excellences in accordance with which they act, there is no reason to deny that this is just what he means.<sup>49</sup> Aristotle is saying that the *exercise* of the moral excellences constitutes happiness for the private persons of whom he is speaking. He believes that whether one regularly exercises the practical excellences on an extensive scale—as does the

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<sup>48</sup> 1178b33-1179a9.

<sup>49</sup> The expression *kata tēn aretēn* could suggest merely the idea of “action compatible with excellence” (as it clearly does at 1105a29) but it is quite unlikely that it does at 1179a9. For Aristotle regularly uses the expression to convey the notion that excellence is being *expressed* or *exercised*. Indeed, Aristotle uses the expression in exactly this way at least twice in 10.8 before the passage under consideration (1178a9 and 1178a21) and then after the passage he uses the parallel expression “the person who is active in accordance with the intellect” (*ho kata noun energōn* [1179a22-23]). Certainly, the latter expression cannot be thought to signify a person whose actions are merely *compatible* with the excellence of theoretical wisdom and not actually expressive of the state of theoretical wisdom. Surely the context ensures that it refers to a person who exercises the excellence of theoretical wisdom that she possesses. It is impossible to believe that in the passage under consideration Aristotle is without any warning suddenly attaching an unusual significance to his use of the word “*kata*” only to employ it soon afterwards in his ordinary fashion and *once again* without providing any warning or explanation for the reader.

politician—or in a more limited way in the sphere of one’s private relationships, one will attain happiness through the exercise of such excellences.

The issue now concerns whether the *philosophers* under discussion are included among the private persons who regularly exercise the moral excellences. It seems beyond doubt that they are at least included among those who exercise these excellences. We know that Aristotle has told us that they choose to act in accordance with the moral excellences, and the only others mentioned who so act are the politicians who exercise these excellences in a capacious way. Much of the rest of the *EN* suggests that *any* human being who possesses and regularly exercises the moral excellences will thereby attain happiness. So, if the philosopher’s private life involves the possession of, and exercise of the moral excellences, then the happiness within the life of the philosopher should be, at least partly, constituted by action in accordance with the moral excellences.<sup>50</sup> Note that in the *Politics*, Aristotle clearly

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<sup>50</sup> There are also strong positive reasons to suppose that Aristotle holds that the philosopher’s happiness must be partly constituted by the exercise of the practical virtues. Here is one. Given Aristotle’s method of establishing his initial definition of the human good by reference to an *ergon* (function) that is *idion* (proper to, or distinctive of) a human being (in *EN* 1.7), it is difficult to understand how he could think that any form of human happiness could fail to include morally excellent and practically wise activities *as constitutive elements*. For Aristotle makes it clear, in the *EN*, as well as other treatises, that a human being is, essentially and distinctively, an animal that has the capacity to engage in practical reasoning, to control through reason his desires and emotions, and to share his life in associations with others. If *human* happiness, for Aristotle, consists *fundamentally* in the excellent actualizations of capacities that are essential to, and distinctive of, human beings, then it seems impossible for Aristotle to recognize a type of human happiness that fails to include (*as constitutive elements*) the excellent activities that pertain to the practical, desiderative, and social capacities of human beings. In light of this obvious problem, intellectualist interpreters often stress the fact that happiness, for Aristotle, is an ultimate end and in *EN* 10 Aristotle clearly has argued that the contemplative life has been shown to satisfy the criteria for an ultimate end better than any other end. But the ultimate end must be an end that is realizable by a human being, and this precisely why Aristotle emphasizes the fact that in so far as the philosopher is a human being living in communities with other human beings, he deliberately chooses to act in accordance with [practical] excellence (1178b5-7). It is true that Aristotle believes that the philosopher enjoys a kind of divine capacity for theoretical activity, but he recognizes that the philosopher is a human being. So, there are two forms of excellent activity that constitute or produce happiness for Aristotle: excellent contemplative activity, a divine activity, and excellent practical activity, a distinctively human activity. The philosopher *qua* divine being enjoys the happiness that is constituted by *theōria*. But the philosopher *qua* human being enjoys the happiness constituted by the excellent activity of what is distinctive of (*idion*) human beings, practical reason together with a faculty of desire that is susceptible to rational guidance. For

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regards those who engage in the occupations of farming, commercial business, craft-work, etc. as incapable of developing the excellences whose exercise constitutes *eudaimonia* (*Pol.* 6.4, 1318b6-17, 4.6, 1292b25-29, 7.9, 1328b33-1329a2). The lack of leisure connected with these occupations, along with the distorting influence of the work that is the focus of these occupations, makes concentration on the development of moral excellence impossible. So, we may ask: who besides the politician is capable of the kinds of morally excellent activity that are central to human happiness? I maintain that besides politicians (at least those politicians who live in relatively stable political systems) Aristotle regards philosophers as either exclusively or predominantly capable of developing the excellences of character, and therefore they are both able and motivated to realize some part of their happiness through the exercise of their morally excellent states of character.

I suspect that a proponent of the intellectualist interpretation will resist this interpretation in a number of ways. Here are two considerations that might be urged against my interpretation. First, it might be said that the contemplative and political lives are understood to have different ultimate ends which structure those lives, the contemplative life has *theōria* as its ultimate end while the political life has excellent practical activity (deployed for the sake of the common good) as its ultimate end. Aristotle does not say, and indeed cannot say, that the contemplative life includes multiple ultimate ends (for that would require the impossibility that there is more than one end chosen just for its own sake and for the sake of which we choose all other ends, cf. *EN* 1.1-7), and therefore the exercise of practical excellences cannot be part of the ultimate end that constitutes the contemplative life. A second consideration would be that I have committed myself to the view that Aristotle has structured the account of *eudaimonia* in the *EN* around the image of the three most favored types of life, and his description of those lives indicates that he believes each of them is organized around a single good which reveals what kind of life it is. The apolaustic life is organized around the pursuit of bodily pleasure, the political life is the life that aims just at grand-scale excellent moral activity, and the theoretical life strives for excellent contemplative activity. The lives are not described as combinations of goods.

In response to the first objection, it should be noted, first, that it is difficult to see how a proponent of the intellectualist interpretation can maintain either that Aristotle's contemplative person is not a morally excellent person (without thereby

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Aristotle, a contemplative being whose happiness consists solely and simply in its contemplative activity is not a human being. It is a god.

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embracing the inconsistency interpretation) or that the contemplative person is a morally excellent person but does not, somehow, derive some measure of her happiness in virtue of the exercise of her moral excellence. For Aristotle makes it clear that the morally excellent person is one who takes pleasure in exercising the moral excellences, loves the excellences, and loves the doing of fine actions (*EN* 1.8, 1099a7-24). Taking pleasure in and loving excellent activity characterizes the philosopher's own state in relation to contemplative activity, activity that constitutes the primary component of the perfect happiness. It is not easy to understand how acting in accordance with practical excellences constitutes happiness for the good politician but fails to constitute any sort of happiness when the philosopher performs the same kinds of excellent acts. Second, it may be a mistake to think that the case of a morally good philosopher who possesses some portion of his happiness from the exercise of the moral excellences makes it necessary to say, absurdly, that he has two ultimate ends. In the first place, the notion of ultimate end is employed by Aristotle to make *eudaimonia* the subject of discussion in the opening chapters of the *EN*. It is not until book 10 that Aristotle divides *eudaimonia* into a perfect or complete happiness and a secondary happiness. Aristotle's view may well be that there is one ultimate end for human beings, excellent activity, and that ultimate end can (and perhaps must) be realized in different ways depending upon the different circumstances, talents, resources, and interests of different human beings. The perfect *eudaimonia* has a partly divine element in it due to the fact that the god(s) engage in contemplative activity and nothing else. Some human beings can achieve this form of *eudaimonia* due to their capacity for *theōria*. But they remain human and so have both limits to the extent and kind of *theōria* they can engage in as well as the capacity for and need to exercise practical excellences. Excellent politicians, on the other hand, also realize the ultimate end of *eudaimonia* but in a secondary way in virtue of their expansive exercise of the practical virtues within the public domain and for the sake of the political community. I do not think that Aristotle would sanction talk of *choosing* one's ultimate end. Human beings *have* one ultimate end in virtue of the kinds of living things they are. But they realize their ultimate end in different ways because of the reasons just given.

Given these points, it is perhaps easier to see now how it is possible to reply to the second objection. It is true that Aristotle characterizes the three types of life in terms of a single good around which the life in question is organized. But this does not, I think, pose a serious problem for the interpretation offered here. In the first

place, the three lives image is surely an oversimplification of the kinds of life human beings actually live. It serves Aristotle's purpose to the extent that it focuses our attention on the sorts of goods that we regard as very important to us and the image probably should not be taken to suggest that Aristotle believed that human beings can only have one such good around which they organize their lives. In my view, his belief that the human good must be a self-sufficient end (cf. *EN* 1.7) suggests that lives built around the pursuit of a single value cannot be genuinely or unqualifiedly happy (although some proponents of the intellectualist interpretation may disagree with this as well). But secondly, even though Aristotle explicitly claims that the morally good philosopher will often engage in excellent practical activities (*because she is human*), the primary component of her happy life is nonetheless *theōria* (*EN* 10.8, 1178a9-14, 1178b1-8).<sup>51</sup> This is the case not because the philosopher fails to achieve any sort of happiness through the exercise of her morally excellent and practically wise actions, but simply because her theoretical activities constitute the central or typifying component of her happiness. That her happy life counts as a contemplative life is due to the fact that it is contemplative activity that most distinguishes her life from what Aristotle regards as the only other type of life that could plausibly count as happy—the excellent political life.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Note that Aristotle does not say that practically excellent activity is intrinsically good and included in happiness because it approximates excellent theoretical activity—as one would expect if Richardson Lear's interpretation was correct. Rather, because one is a human being and has both a practical intellect and a desiderative and emotional part of the soul, the exercise of excellences pertaining to these parts must be included in any form of happiness that a human being might attain.

<sup>52</sup> One should not infer from this claim that a human being who engages in morally excellent activity within her private life cannot attain some measure of her happiness from that activity. Although Aristotle takes excellent contemplative activity and excellent political activity to be the central or typifying goods of the two types of happy lives he discusses in *EN* 10, it is clear now that both the excellent contemplative life and the excellent political life involve practical wisdom and that practical wisdom and full excellence of character mutually imply one another (*EN* 10.7, 1178b5-7, *EN* 6.8, 12-13). Aristotle tells us at the beginning of *EN* 6.8 that *politikē* and *phronēsis* are the same state (*hexis*), even though their being is not the same. I take this claim to mean that the terms refer to the same state or disposition but they are defined differently. But this is so only because *phronēsis* is not necessarily deployed in the most extensive service of the common good, as it is when it takes the form of *politikē*. However, this seems to be a difference of scale or direction, not a genuinely fundamental difference. Consequently, in so far as the excellence of *phronēsis* is exercised in a complete human life (and accompanied, necessarily, with excellence of character), it



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should have an implication similar to the same sort of exercise as the excellence of *politikē*, namely, some level of *eudaimonia*.



# EUTHYPHRO AND THE LOGIC OF MIASMA

Maureen ECKERT

**ABSTRACT:** Euthyphro is a Socratic interlocutor claiming enormous religious expertise, while his portrayal in the eponymous dialogue raises questions the reliability of his beliefs. This paper closely examines how Euthyphro justifies his case against his father, identifying an argument that relies on the concept of miasma (pollution). In so far as miasma is considered in isolation, Euthyphro has a good argument. Unfortunately, there is more than miasma at stake when considering why one could prosecute one's own parent. Introducing the other relevant concepts, honor and shame, we find his case reflects a dilemma at the source of ancient Greek religious thought. It would not be possible for Euthyphro or anyone else to know what to do in his case.

**KEYWORDS:** Plato, Euthyphro, Dilemma, Miasma, Pollution

This is why even now I go around in accordance with the God, seeking out and investigating both citizens and foreigners, any whom I suppose are wise, and when someone doesn't seem so to me, I make it clear they are not wise, assisting the god. (*Appology* 23b)<sup>1</sup>

Euthyphro is a classic Socratic interlocutor, one who claims expertise in religion and is then shown that he does not know what he claims to know. Plato's vivid characterization of Euthyphro's variety of quirks, his claims of superiority, his lack of self-awareness, his susceptibility to Socrates' mocking flattery, the outrageousness of his case, make it easy to lose sight of any philosophically significant elements contained in his claims. While he exemplifies the type of epistemic hubris Socrates is out to cure, it would be a mistake to write him off *ad hominem*. This paper explores the source of Euthyphro's cognitive confidence, an argument he makes to justify prosecuting his father for murder. In the first section of this paper, we look at the particularities of the situation surrounding the case. Then we examine the argument he makes, clarifying his assertions into a more formal format. With this argument clarified, we can consider the available options for interpreting it. In the third section of this paper, Margaret Visser's work on the

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Plato are my own translations.

legal system at Athens in the Classical Period serves as a heuristic for understanding Euthyphro's line of thought—the 'logic of miasma' which epitomizes the Pollution-Avoidance value system. Euthyphro's relatives claim that Euthyphro is acting impiously with their judgment expressing the values of the Honor/Shame system. Applying both value systems to Euthyphro's argument, their clash becomes readily apparent. The fourth section of the paper addresses the complication emerging from this clash of value systems found in the *Oresteia* and the dilemma Orestes faces in this tragedy. It turns out the Euthyphro's case is a version of this insolvable problem. Euthyphro's case serves to introduce the main problem for the dialogue as a whole. The concepts operating in ancient Greek religion, expressed by the poets, create the very problem that Euthyphro hopes could be resolved in the trial against his father. The Athenian legal system would require an *independent* conception of piety to prosecute religious cases.

### 1. An Unfortunate Series of Events

After greeting Socrates at the start of the dialogue, Euthyphro explains to Socrates that he is prosecuting someone he's thought insane to be prosecuting—his own father (3e through 4e). Socrates is surprised by this admission, noting that the crime would have to be quite serious for such a situation to transpire. At Athens, family members were not expected to prosecute each other in court, and when this happened the crime usually involved other family members, as Socrates mentions. There was no Athenian law explicitly prohibiting the prosecution of a parent for, yet religious and social norms obligated children to honor their parents.<sup>2</sup>

In Aristophanes' "Clouds," Socrates' 'teachings' at the Thinkery result in the denouement in which a son, Pheidippides, beats his father, Strepsiades. Pheidippides, transformed into a Sophist by Socrates over the course of the comedy, argues for a son's right to beat his own father—and mother as well.<sup>3</sup> Ancient Greek mythology conveys the message of honoring one's parents. In fact, the remark Socrates makes at about the defendant being a 'flight-risk' (4a) alludes to one such myth, the myth

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<sup>2</sup> Socrates, shocked by the revelation that Euthyphro is prosecuting his own father, expresses that only a very serious inter-familial legal situation that might justify this action: "Then, is the man your father killed a relative? Clearly so, because you wouldn't prosecute your own father for the murder of a stranger (4b)."

<sup>3</sup> Ronna Burger makes a strong case for interpreting Plato's *Euthyphro* as a reply and corrective to Aristophanes' "Clouds" in her book *On Plato's Euthyphro* (Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung: Munich, 2015), 13 (where thesis is first presented).

of Icarus. References to Daedalus reappear later on in the dialogue (11b through d), reinforcing this theme. Icarus was the son of the legendary artificer, Daedalus. Trapped with his father in the labyrinth of the Minotaur, they both escape using wings Daedalus makes. Although Daedalus warns his son not to fly too low or too high, the son disregards this warning, flying too close to the sun and falling to his death. Euthyphro appears to be disregarding the warnings he receives with similar hubris.

Euthyphro's case against his father is not a straightforward one—as he explains to Socrates:

The person who was killed was a hired day laborer of mine. When we were farming in Naxos he worked for us there. In a fit of drunken rage he'd cut the throat of one of our household slaves, so my father bound his hands and his feet together, threw him in some ditch, and then sent a man here to Athens to inquire from the head seer what needed to be done. During that time my father made little account of—and even completely neglected—the bound man, it being no matter whether he suffered because he was a murderer. Hunger, cold and the bonds caused his death before the messenger returned from the seer. Both my father and my other kinsmen are angry with me because I'm prosecuting my father for murder on behalf of a murderer when he hadn't really killed him, so they say. And even if it were true he had killed him, the dead man, being a murderer, doesn't need consideration because it is impious for a son to prosecute his father for murder. But, Socrates, they wrongfully perceive what the divine law holds in regard to piety and impiety. (4c-e)

His father appears to have unintentionally, through *neglect* as Euthyphro states, caused the death of a laborer who had killed a slave. While drunk, the laborer fought with the slave, violently killing him. He was bound and thrown into a ditch while still raging and intoxicated. Euthyphro's father sent to the head seer at Athens and while waiting for the messenger to return the laborer, left bound in a ditch, dies.<sup>4</sup> Euthyphro has decided that the laborer's death was wrongfully caused and his father needs to be brought to justice. As a point of law in Athens, only relatives

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<sup>4</sup> The manner in which Euthyphro's father sends to Athens to the head seer there and does not ask his son, the local seer and religious expert, strongly suggests that Euthyphro was motivated to bring his case against his father on account of this disrespect, Euthyphro's father, like the Athenians in the Assembly that laugh at him when he prophesizes (3 b-c), does not appear to take him seriously. Robert Talisse, in his article, "Teaching Plato's Euthyphro Dialogically," *Teaching Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (June 2003): 163-175, argues that the dramatic details in this dialogue are Plato's means of showing that Euthyphro's case is made for the sake of recognition and incorporate revenge against his father for not recognizing him.

would charge a suspected killer for the murder of one of their kinsman: The identity of the victim *does matter* in a murder trial, contrary to what Euthyphro later claims.<sup>5</sup> He indicates that the laborer whom his father killed was a ‘dependent’ of his, yet Euthyphro’s move to prosecute a case on his behalf is a stretch under Athenian law. The slave that was murdered by the laborer had no rights at all at Athens. The dispute between Euthyphro and his father concerns the laborer, and Euthyphro’s decision to prosecute his father for murdering the laborer causes a dispute between him and his relatives.

Euthyphro makes a legal and religious claim—he is concerned with justice (*dikaiosune*) as well as pollution (*miasma*).<sup>6</sup> Murder is unjust *and* causes pollution. According to Euthyphro, a murderer should be legally prosecuted, regardless of who he or she is or whom he or she kills. Even if tradition holds that it is impious to prosecute, injure or dishonor a parent, Euthyphro believes that this tradition is not the right way to achieve justice—and incurs pollution. It seems that Euthyphro wishes to introduce new principles in the Athenian legal system. First, the identity of the victim is irrelevant for prosecuting someone. One can prosecute a case on behalf of someone outside your kin group. And second, one must be bring wrongdoers to justice regardless of one’s personal relationships. There are no legal

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<sup>5</sup> Alban D. Winspear discusses the changes in meaning the term ‘*dike*’ (justice) undergoes in Ancient Greek culture in his book, *The Genesis of Plato’s Thought* (New York: S.A. Russell, 1940), 37–64. The term for justice, ‘dike,’ in the Homeric period regarded ‘the way of things.’ In this period, it referred to customs, which were right simply because they were the ways in which things were done. A change in the meaning of the term arose between Homer and the poet Hesiod. Communal, tribal ownership of land passed into landed aristocracy and the city-state, and blood-ties were no longer a means to successfully regulate communal relationships. The idea of justice becomes more abstract. It becomes an ‘eternal principle’ that stands outside of human relationships and is not identified with custom (the relationships themselves). The idea of ‘*nomos*’ (law) as pertaining to human custom and convention, while ‘*dike*’ regards an abstract standard of what is right emerges. Euthyphro’s view about justice and pollution is an interesting hybrid of the more abstract notion of justice found in Hesiod (and afterwards), with the ancient idea of *miasma*. In opposing his relatives’ views, he opposes custom equated with what is right, the earlier view of *dike*. In this way, it seems that Euthyphro’s idea of justice and piety is ‘innovative’ in that he combines the current notion of justice in Athenian culture with an ancient religious idea.

<sup>6</sup> From Euthyphro’s greeting to Socrates in the first line of the dialogue “What innovation brings you here to the King Archon’s porch?” the idea of ‘innovation’ is highlighted (2a). Socrates is never at the courts, hence this greeting, but innovation about religion (*kainotheism*) is an element of the charges he faces. It is important to note that Euthyphro is also there at the porch innovating with his own case.

precedents for Euthyphro to rely upon. Besides the tangled issue of prosecuting someone for the murder of a murderer, his relatives think Euthyphro is acting impiously in prosecuting his own father. The details of the case suggest that the situation is far from clear, that his father may be guilty of manslaughter, unintentionally killing the murderer while attempting to seek expert religious advice.

## 2. Euthyphro's Argument

Taking a closer look at how Euthyphro presents his case to Socrates, we can find an argument. This argument helps explain the source of Euthyphro's confidence. We know he is overconfident in his abilities as a seer (he is laughed at in the Assembly when he prophesizes), however there's a line of argument that he's developed and may be rehearsing with Socrates when he articulates it. He states:

It's very amusing, Socrates, that you, of all people, think it makes a difference whether the victim is a stranger or relative, and not bear in mind one thing, whether the killer acted justly. If he acted justly, let him go, but if not, one should prosecute, especially if he shares your hearth and eats at the same table with you. The pollution is the same if, being aware of what's right, you keep company with such a man and don't purify yourself and him from pollution by bringing him to justice. (4b-c)

We can clean this up more formally:

– Unstated Premise: Murder produces pollution (*miasma*).

- 1) The identity of the person killed makes no difference.
- 2) If a killer acted justly, he must be let go.
- 3) If a killer acted unjustly (murdered), they must be prosecuted.
- 4) Pollution is the same (for all parties) if one keeps company with someone one knows has killed unjustly.
- 5) If a killer acted unjustly they must be prosecuted on account of their pollution and pollution of their household.

Therefore:

- 6) One must prosecute (even) someone from one's own household, if one knows that they have killed unjustly, in order to avoid pollution.

With this argument set out, we can examine how particularities in ancient Greek religion affect the perceived truth-values of the premises, gaining insight into Euthyphro's thought process.

## 3. The Logic of *Miasma*

The work of Margaret Visser provides a helpful heuristic for interpreting Euthyphro's argument.<sup>7</sup> She identifies three value systems at large in Athenian society: (1) The Honor/Shame system, which applies to familial relations and community status. The preservation of familial honor is prioritized within a kin-group and externally in terms of maintaining a kin-group's social status in the community.<sup>8</sup> (2) The Legal System, providing publically known laws and a system for enforcing them. The Athenian legal system also interacts with the kin-based Honor/Shame system and religious observances.<sup>9</sup> (3) The Pollution—Avoidance system is a religious value system that prioritizes maintaining a state ritual purity such that members of the community can form a unified religious community. Procedures of ritual cleansing are required to maintain the bonds of this community. Expiation procedures include religious rituals that cleanse a polluted and quarantined subject permitting them to rejoin the community. Euthyphro's father was following just such a procedure in quarantining the laborer after he murdered the slave. In a state of bloodguilt, the laborer could not be kept with other people. The messenger from the Head Seer (*Mantis*) at Athens would have provided information about the required ritual cleansing.

Euthyphro's move is to select just one of these systems, following its 'logic' to the bitter end. Visser notes "Pollution, in ancient Greece, was another self-contained system with what could be considered a logic of its own."<sup>10</sup> For contemporary readers, the concept of pollution or bloodguilt may be somewhat obscure. While pollution bears some similarity to 'sinfulness' in Christian traditions, it is unhelpful comparatively—especially for understanding Euthyphro's argument. This is because *miasma* has a distinctive characteristic of *contagion*. Without expiation, other

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret Visser, "Vengeance and Pollution in Classical Athens," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (April–June, 1984): 193-206.

<sup>8</sup> The honor of a family is preserved in bringing the criminal to justice in the legal system. There is no public prosecutor. The honor-bound unity of male family members is the mechanism that brings criminals to justice. Just as bloodguilt causes pollution (*miasma*), the blight of shame (*aidos*) is brought upon families. Vengeance (*poine*) is expressed and moderated through the legal system (*dike*) to remove shame.

<sup>9</sup> The porch of the King Archon, the magistrate in charge if determining whether or not the *graphe* (written accusations) for cases of murder and impiety move forward to trial, had stele that were inscribed with the laws of Athens as well as the religious calendar. The laws and religion were not separate at Athens.

<sup>10</sup> Visser, "Vengeance and Pollution in Classical Athens," 198.



members of a household and community incur miasma. It is viral in nature. One doesn't merely expiate pollution for oneself, but for the sake of the community.

Miasma left unchecked can overshoot legal justice and ordinary motivations of personal vengeance (*poine*). Innocent people can be affected by miasma, people who are neither responsible for a crime nor guilty of any criminal or moral association. In fact, "knowingly sharing a table with a polluted person" will incur miasma but unknowingly doing so as well, magnifying Euthyphro's claim. Oedipus, *not knowing* he has killed his father and married his mother, incurs miasma and unknowingly brings miasma upon the entire city of Thebes. Pollution is powerful force that is difficult to control.

Euthyphro believes that certain premises of his argument are true, given what miasma entails. We can review premises of his argument to see this.

**1) The identity of the person killed makes no difference.**

The identity of the victim does not matter is in terms of incurring miasma, just as Euthyphro claims. Bloodguilt causes pollution. This is ground zero with respect to any instance of pollution in a community. Euthyphro is not considering an abstract conception of justice with respect to this premise. While we might agree with Euthyphro that the identity of a victim is irrelevant in a case of murder, Euthyphro's argument hinges on the nature of pollution and it's why he would assert this premise. Given the contagious nature of miasma, it also doesn't matter whom the criminal is either. Thus, he also asserts premise (4):

**4) Pollution is the same (for all parties) if one keeps company with someone one knows has killed unjustly.**

It's important to keep in mind that the *identical state of pollution* asserted erases the difference between someone guilty of murder and someone that is an accomplice after the fact or obstructs justice. From this premises, Euthyphro asserts:

**5) If a killer acted unjustly they must be prosecuted on account of their pollution and pollution of their household.**

Here, Euthyphro follows the logic of miasma to cases like his own, where, on account of miasma he is forced to do 'housekeeping.' Any polluted member of a household poses a danger to that whole family. The conclusion Euthyphro arrives at, (6) One must prosecute (even) someone from one's own household, if one knows that they have killed unjustly, in order to avoid pollution, is derived from the *indiscriminate power* of miasma over an entire household. It is why Euthyphro

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believes he needs to prosecute his father for murder. According the logic of miasma, he would be correct.

#### 4. All in the Family

Euthyphro has generated a justification for prosecuting his father keeping narrowly focused on the concept of miasma and its workings. But when we examine his argument in light of the Honor/Shame value system things no longer work smoothly. It's not much of an argument anymore.

- 1) Murder produces pollution. (True in the Pollution—Avoidance system).
- 2) Prosecuting one's own parent brings shame. (True in the Honor/Shame system.).
- 3) The identity of the person killed makes no difference. (True in the Pollution-Avoidance system and False in the Honor/Shame system)
- 4) If a killer acted justly, he must be let go. (True)
- 5) If a killer acted unjustly (murdered), they must be prosecuted. (True)
- 6) Pollution is the same (for all parties) if one keeps company with someone one knows has killed unjustly. (True in the Pollution-Avoidance system, False in the Honor/Shame system given (2))
- 7) If a killer acted unjustly they must be prosecuted on account of their pollution and pollution of their household. (True in the Pollution—Avoidance system, False in the Honor/Shame system given (2))

Therefore:

- 8) One must prosecute (even) someone from one's own household, if one knows that they have killed unjustly, in order to avoid pollution. (True in Pollution/Avoidance system, False in Honor/Shame system given (2))

Once the Honor/Shame System is in play, prosecuting one's parent for murder will bring shame to one's family. Euthyphro's miasma-specific assertions are falsified with its introduction. However, premise (3), which is now falsified, is false for significant reasons that merit a closer look:

#### **3) The identity of someone who is killed makes no difference.**

While true following the logic of miasma, this premise has a notorious place in the Honor/Shame System. The paradigm case is presented in Aeschylus' "Oresteia," where we find the Orestes Dilemma. Orestes' mother, Queen Clytemnestra, murders Orestes' father, King Agamemnon. (She murders him on account of his sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia, in order to continue sailing to Troy.) Orestes is faced with a dilemma, He must avenge the death of his father to

avoid shame, but he must murder his mother, incurring pollution as a matricide in order to do so. Orestes murders his mother, avoiding shame, but then is placed in the impossible situation of committing a polluting act, the murder of his mother, in order to expiate the bloodguilt of her polluting act of murder of his father.

This highly charged premise, so devastating within the Honor/Shame System is part of Euthyphro's argument. The identity of the victim very much matters. If your mother happens to kill your father, it matters a great deal. Orestes is driven insane and chased by the Erinyes seeking vengeance for his matricide. The goddess Athena appears *deus ex machina* in order finally free Orestes from this vicious cycle of pollution that has fallen on the House of Atreus. She establishes trial by jury at Athens to decide the case of the Erinyes against Orestes, although this is insufficient to determine the matter. Only Athena can break the tie. Euthyphro is ironically bringing to trial the very type of case that *failed to be decided* by jury according to Aeschylus.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. The Tangled Web

The name "Euthyphro" means 'straight-thinker' and it seems to reflect a Platonic irony since the dialogue moves in a circle. Yet, it fairly accurately describes Euthyphro's thinking, which is very much straight and narrowly focused on miasma. Socrates wants to know how Euthyphro can be so sure he is right:

With Zeus as a witness, Euthyphro, do you believe you understand what religion maintains and what is pious and impious so accurately that, as far as those things you say happened, you're not afraid of possibly doing something impious by bringing your father to trial? (4e)

Euthyphro has profound, even comic, certainty in his superior wisdom. He states, "[t]here would be no use for me, Socrates, and Euthyphro would not surpass the majority of men, if I didn't accurately know all such things." (4e-5a) Euthyphro's claim to be superior to all other people and possess accurate knowledge about religion has the marking of *hubris*—arrogance regarding one's position or abilities

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<sup>11</sup> Rory B. Egan in "Tragic Piety in Plato's *Euthyphro*," *Dionysius*, 7 (1983): 17-32, suggests that Euthyphro's character and his case amount to a parody of the characters from Greek tragedy driven not of concern for piety to act impiously. The hero, Orestes, is a paradigmatic example of this dilemma. Egan's thesis is that the dialogue is a comic attack upon the poet's account of piety. I agree with this view, although I find that Plato casts a much wider net in terms of literary associations that can be made with the dialogue. These include the myth of Daedalus, as well as Aristophanes' "Clouds."

that overlooks one's limitations. It is *hubris* that causes Icarus to fall to his death. Epistemic *hubris*, claiming to know when one does not know, typically serves as a spur to philosophical discussion in the early group of Platonic dialogues. In the *Apology*, Socrates' mission is to question those claiming to be knowledgeable, in order to cure their epistemic hubris. Euthyphro makes himself an open target for the Socratic investigation into his wisdom that follows.

Euthyphro's case against his father sets the stage for this inquiry. For all his hubris and lack of self-awareness, he has managed to construct as clear an argument for indicting his father as one could possibly make by focusing on miasma. Although miasma can be conceptually treated as a closed system, it interacts with the Honor/Shame System and the Legal System in non-ideal scenarios (as Plato depicts in the dialogue). In fact, these systems are viciously interlocking when it comes to an Orestes' Dilemma type cases of which Euthyphro's belongs.

The Pollution-Avoidance value system dictates that Euthyphro must prosecute whomever the wrongdoer is while, at the same time, doing so violates the Honor/Shame system. According to the tragic poet Aeschylus, trial by jury was established to thwart the Erinyes' claim on Orestes for matricide. However, as Euthyphro's case reveals, miasma still gives rise to such dilemmas. Ancient Greek religion lacks the conceptual resources to resolve these problems from within. As long as the Legal System is intertwined with religion, nothing can be settled. Neither Euthyphro nor his relatives are ultimately right. Most importantly, one could know everything there is to know about religion—as Euthyphro claims—yet have no way to make sense of whether he or his relatives are correct. The poets, ranging from Homer and Hesiod to the tragic playwrights, are the sources for his religious views, but they have provided adherents with insoluble problems.<sup>12</sup> The philosophical dissection of the concept of piety (*hosion*) in the rest of the dialogue is not only a corrective to Aristophanes' portrait of Socrates in the "Clouds," but is also a roadmap for what would have to be understood to legally adjudicate religious infractions without the influence of the accounts of the poets.

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<sup>12</sup> Socrates admits that the stories of the poets are a problem for him: "Indeed, Euthyphro, can this be the reason I'm under indictment, because whenever such things are said about the gods I find them so difficult to accept? It seems that because of this I will be told that I do wrong." (6b)

# BOUNDLESS SKEPTICISM AND THE FIVE MODES

Allysson Vasconcelos Lima ROCHA

**ABSTRACT:** There is a difference between the tasks of interpreting Sextus Empiricus and contesting his arguments. Usually, one does the latter relying on some version of the former. Though this seems obvious, it is easy to make mistakes in this endeavor. From this point, I draw two basic recommendations which we should follow, lest we take Sextus to hold implausible positions regarding his Five Modes. However, these recommendations lead us to interpret Sextus' Pyrrhonism as a limited skepticism. In the final section, as I suggest a counter-example to this commitment, I reconsider the notion of infinite (*apeiron*) in the Five Modes to better explain interpretation and criticism of Sextus' arguments.

**KEYWORDS:** skepticism, Pyrrhonism, five modes, infinity, *apeiron*

There are two basic ways of approaching Sextus Empiricus' works. The first features the effort of interpreting Sextus and mining his work for insights. What takes precedence is offering a coherent picture of Sextus' writings. The second manner of approaching these works is to assume an interpretation of the writings and to either assess the cogency of Sextus' arguments, or to contest them. One, in short, engages with Sextus for the sake of making an anti-skeptical argument. Sometimes an interchange between these two approaches can take place. Here, I wish to explore this mixed program. My aim is to offer something relevant for both realms of investigation by discussing a possible interchange between interpreting and contesting Sextus' argumentation. Thus, in the first section, I discuss examples of these two manners of dealing with Sextus' skeptical arguments. I extract two basic outcomes from these discussions. They are both centered in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and concerned with the issue of the scope of the suspension of belief. I assume them as basic orientations for any efforts on interpretation of these works. In the second section I reassess these orientations, dealing with what oddly seems to be their implication, i.e., that the arguments in the *Outlines* are constrained to the context where they emerged. In the last section I focus on the Five Modes of suspension and propose that, with them, we can better understand both the

suggested constraints and why it is so difficult to offer an objection to Sextus if we accept as plausible these rules of interpretation.

### 1.

I begin with an important excerpt of the debate regarding the scope of suspension. I wish to promote two outcomes whose implications I further consider. Let me, first, explain, how the debate emerges. A Pyrrhonian skeptic is drawn to investigation in response to the disquiet she feels when facing anomalous appearances and conflicts of opinion. However, as the investigation proceeds, our investigator finds it hard to eliminate the conflicting character of what appears, or to reach a decision on how things really are. She bases her investigation on all the means available in her context to achieve this decision. As none of them proves successful to eliminate the undecidability, she has as a result, not as a conclusion, the suspension of her judgment. But what does the suspension of judgment concern? If we take belief as an answer, we become curious about the scope of this suspension. Does it make sense to say that she suspends judgment about *all* her beliefs? For, if we take beliefs to exert an important role in most of our daily activities, we immediately tend to hold a suspicious regard on the claim that the suspension is about all beliefs.

This reasoning exemplifies how the scope of suspension becomes a problem when someone attempts to understand Pyrrhonian skepticism. To begin, there are two widely known interpretive positions of suspension. The first initially understands that suspension encompasses *all* beliefs, as long as we can make sense of how a skeptic can achieve a detachment from herself by regarding the beliefs which occur in her as not hers. The second is that it is inevitable for the skeptic to hold beliefs, thereby restricting the scope of suspension to philosophical or theoretical commitments.<sup>1</sup> These two positions are most famously represented by Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede, respectively. They, however, do not exhaust the logical space.

More to the point, I'm addressing here the standpoint which Jonathan Barnes<sup>2</sup> proposes. In the problem of the scope, Barnes's view calls for a cautionary regard, brought by a detailed analysis of the aspects surrounding the views offered by Burnyeat and Frede above. As Barnes understands the matter, the problem of the

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<sup>1</sup> Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede, eds., *The Original Sceptics: a Controversy* (Indianapolis and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Hackett, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Barnes. "The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist," in *The Original Sceptics: a Controversy*, ed. Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede (Indianapolis and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Hackett, 1998), 58-91.

scope might be unreal.<sup>3</sup> He views the scope of suspension as varying from skeptic to skeptic, depending on what is anomalous for one, or what is disturbance for the other. Details such as these would calibrate the extent to which one's judgment is suspended, and the presupposition of a general scope would be deemed implausible. This the first point on which I wish to expand. It is plausible to think that anomalies vary, along with the investigations which follow them and the suspensions obtained, delivering distinct scopes of commitments for skeptical reflection and, ultimately, suspension. The first outcome to be obtained here is that we should *deem the object of suspension as something subjectively determined, dependent on the case of each skeptic and the anomalies she might face, thereby prompting investigation*. I call this first outcome *subjective constraints of investigation* (from now on, SCI). Things may affect each one of us differently. We are, then, driven towards different anomalies and, by consequence, different investigations and suspensions. More specifically, what I am initially trying to say is that the proper comprehension of the object of suspension is dependent on the object of investigation and how it is determined. In the following sections I intend to show that this isn't solely applicable to the matter of suspension.

Meanwhile, it is fair to consider an initial reply to this view. According to it, regardless of the individual differences, there should be a way of distinguishing how suspension takes place, both in its scope and object. A proper analysis of belief and propositional attitude could afford us a general perspective on this. What this suggests is that we can comprehend the scope of suspension without resorting to any specificities about the skeptic and investigation. However, let me raise a few considerations in favor of Barnes' position, something that delivers a second outcome.

One consideration in favor of Barnes' position is that, at the height of their debate about the scope, both Burnyeat and Frede make important amendments in their views. One of the main motivations was the concern that it should be wrong to rely on an anachronistic background when interpreting Sextus' arguments. This was illustrated by Burnyeat's discussion of the insulation view wrongly applied, for example, by Gassendi to Sextus.<sup>4</sup> Could we say that Sextus saw first-order judgments as insulated from the philosophizing about them? Most probably, this view would

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<sup>3</sup> Barnes, "The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist", 89.

<sup>4</sup> Myles Burnyeat, "The Sceptic in his Place and Time", in *The Original Sceptics: a Controversy*, ed. Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede (Indianapolis and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Hackett, 1998), 92.

not make sense for someone like Sextus, as the distinction is inserted in a different philosophical context. A similar point was made by Frede,<sup>5</sup> when he distinguishes between dogmatic and classical skepticism. We must be aware, he emphasizes, that classical skeptics like Sextus are not to be seen as holding any position. We are to properly comprehend two different forms of assertion supposedly taken by the skeptic in addressing the possibility of knowledge.

This excerpt of the debate concerning the scope of suspension provides us with a second consequence. But to obtain this result it is required to assume SCI above. For, as I understand the point shared by Burnyeat and Frede above, it lurks in the background of their respective revisions. This reflects, even if indirectly, the subjective constraints of investigation, though it does not imply the acceptance of Barnes' view.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the outcome is the following: *any attempt of going beside the constraints of the context increases the risk of attributing to Sextus an anachronistic theoretical framework which is either foreign to his context, or something simply not considered by him.*

I call this second outcome the *context constraint* (from now on, CC), and I will assume it from now on, along with SCI. At the same time that they can bring us a clarifying view on the questions regarding suspension, they also suggest an interesting perspective on the skepticism described in *Outlines*. It appears that what prompts the skeptic towards the application of her *dunamis antithetike* comes from what theories are in conflict in the context where she is. More to the point, as Sextus himself acknowledges, the concern is with "the unclear things being investigated by the Sciences" (*PH* 1.13). Hence, if the object and scope of suspension is something subjectively determined, a lot will depend on the unclear things under investigation which feature in the skeptic's context. Again, it is a contentious matter if we should or should not embrace the subjective view of the scope and object of suspension, although it seems plausible to concede the subjective constraint of investigation. But, regardless of how the discussion unfolds in the first point, I think it is fair to say that we should, at least, initially acknowledge that we must be careful and avow SCI and CC in our interpretations of how far the suspension goes and its object. In the next section I begin to explore the consequences of assuming this position in the outset.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Frede, "The Sceptic's Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge", in *The Original Sceptics: a Controversy*, ed. Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede (Indianapolis and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Hackett, 1998), 128.

<sup>6</sup> I mention this because Burnyeat, for example, acknowledges his chapter as a response to Barnes' points. Cf. Myles Burnyeat, "The Sceptic in his Place and Time", no. 13, 97.



## 2.

I began the last section with a description of the skeptic in her efforts to address anomalies of appearances and wide disagreement. I understand that the many different difficulties she faces along the way could be seen as manifested in the diversity of the familiar skeptical modes. But some stage-setting is required for a due explanation of what I mean by the modes and what difficulties they represent. According to Sextus in *PH* 1.31, the application of the skill which defines the skeptic precedes the modes, that is, it could be seen as a general mode based on the ability to “oppose what appears to what appears, or what is thought of to what is thought of, or crosswise.” Moreover, this skill is manifested when the skeptic faces “some unclear object of investigation” (*PH* 1.13), something to which the skeptic soon demonstrates unsurmountable difficulties for justified assent. Obviously, there are different oppositions depending on the object of assent which is presented and the things to be opposed. To show how Sextus makes this clear, first, I wish to explore how the oppositions led to different modes in response to the constraints of the context and the investigation. Here, I show how CC and SCI above work in association with two of the Ten Modes of Aenesidemus. Later, I turn my attention to the Five Modes in order to explore a similar dynamics. My aim is to understand if the constraint of the context could represent a limitation for the modes, that is, if they would lose their force when considered in a different context from which they originally emerged. I explore this matter through purported counter-examples to CC. As none of them holds, CC and SCI yield the conclusion that the modes have a limited scope of application. But what I initially argue in this section is that this is not a limited skepticism, but, as most skepticisms are, a consideration of our limitations. I better explain the point in the final section.

Returning to CC, the proposal is to explore the context constraint in the formulation of the modes. My hypothesis is that, if we should not apply any foreign theory to Sextus’ views, we should see that Sextus consistently indexes suspension to subjects and their particular inquiries. For it is plausible to think that Sextus, and the reported creators of the modes, Agrippa and Aenesidemus, were not accessing some atemporal and decontextualized source when conceiving their formulation. The ability to oppose objects of perception or objects of thought, for example, could already be seen as a heritage from the sophists and their techniques of argumentation (see Protagoras fragment A1, and Gorgias fragment A1a). These skeptics particularized these strategies. In order to better explain my point, I turn to two passages. In the first, Sextus specifies that “what we investigate is not what is

apparent but what is said about what is apparent” (*PH* 1.19-20), and further he explains that in the case of arguments directed against what is apparent, the skeptic is using them as a way of countering the rashness of the Dogmatists. Further, in a second passage, Sextus clarifies that “when I say ‘Opposed to every account there is an equal account,’ I am implicitly saying this: ‘to every account I have scrutinized (...) there appears to me to be opposed another account (...)’” (*PH* 1.203). In association with CC, these passages afford the interpretation already mentioned above, i.e., the oppositions are set in accordance to what the skeptic scrutinizes or receives as an account. The important addition is the subjective perspective emphasized by the passage, for the opposition is raised “to every account *I* have scrutinized.” Such example reinforces the plausibility of SCI, since Sextus has explicitly restricted the modes to the investigations he has undertaken. Now, if the modes begin from these oppositions, it is plausible to expect them to be structured from the accounts with which the skeptic has had contact, that is, the particular theories. I proceed to show this in two of the Ten Modes of Aenesedimus.

At *PH* 1.46, while displaying the modes based on the difference among animals and the supposed conflict among our sense organs, Sextus comes with the following line: “it is surely far more reasonable, given that animals’ eyes contain mixtures of different humors, that they should also get different appearances from existing objects”. Thus, based on an investigation concerning what is apparently said in these fields, Sextus achieves a situation where to tell how an existing object really is becomes something undecidable. After all, according to theories in his context, different humors could prompt different perceptions of the object. How are we to decide which is the correct one?

However, observe that Sextus is forging the premisses of his argumentation from an outmoded theory about the physiology of living beings. Would this be enough for us to raise some doubts about it, or even to dismiss this as a skeptical consideration concerning our perception? This is what following CC and SCI would recommend. As these modes were composed assuming specific theories of physiology and perception, they should represent a skeptical threat only for those who take this theoretical framework to explain how we perceive the world. As these theories are not the basis for explaining sense perception today, the two modes no longer represent a skeptical threat and we would be entitled to dismiss them as such. Maybe, these can be considered, *pace* Sextus (*PH* 1.35), as the modes to be deemed unsound, if the outdated background truly compromises the scope of both.

Let me make this point in a different way, one which is relevant to what follows next. Imagine that we give ourselves the task of continuing this skeptical tradition nowadays and of updating effectively these two modes. To do this, in accordance with what Sextus presents in the *Outlines*, the first thing to be done is to conduct an investigation to the point of better manipulating the concepts in today's science. This is not the simple case where I have to spot disagreement among scientists on the matter of perception to attain undecidability and, as a consequence, suspension of judgement. The case is that I should investigate how cognitive science explains visual phenomena, for example, in order to demonstrate how color perception works and, then, reenact the mode similarly to what is presented above, if possible. At this point, then, someone would be able to properly structure an opposition between different episodes of cognitive perception from the standpoint of a certain theory.

This might yield the conclusion that the skeptic has to be an expert in a certain area of investigation in order to duly apply the *dunamis antithetike*. This sounds odd, at first, and in need of clarification. As I understand, only by considering the same problems in the context of the Five Modes can we comprehend what is at stake in this case. So far, I think it is plausible to conclude that, if we accept CC, these two modes don't hold as a means to identify undecidability on matters of perception. To put the matter differently, if CC guides us in interpreting these two modes, we may consider them as restrained for those who defended the four humors theory, and should not represent a concern today.

Thus, could we say that the Five Modes fall prey to the same problems which I addressed above, concerning two of the other ten modes? A first look on the matter may lead us to the conclusion that it does. I mentioned above that the raising of opposing arguments can be traced back to the well-known technique of the sophists. In the case of the Five Modes, something similar could be said.

Peter Klein,<sup>7</sup> for example, holds that, in the Five Modes, Sextus has his reasoning guided by an Aristotelian view on how someone should bring forth a proof to decide something. Again, there should be no surprise here. Sextus himself, in the opening of *PH*, claims to be addressing Aristotle as someone among the dogmatists. And the demand for a "point from which to begin to establish something" (*PH*1.166) in the *ad infinitum* mode surely reminds us of Aristotle's formulation of his regress

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Klein, "Epistemic Justification and the Limits of Pyrrhonism", in *Pyrrhonism in Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Diego E. Machuca (New York: Springer, 2011), 79-96.

argument in *Posterior Analytics* (72b5-18 and 72b25-28). Could these remarks allow us to say that this is the constraint on the Five Modes? Klein<sup>8</sup> argues for the existence of this constraint, in tandem with what I just explored in the case of the two modes above. Only for someone who endorses important features of Aristotle's view on the matter could the Five Modes represent a problem. I explore this line of reasoning in connection with what I have already discussed so far.

I'm trying to relate this line of reasoning offered by Klein to the issues I have explored so far, concerned with CC and SCI. Thus, it is plausible to imagine Sextus scrutinizing the writings of Aristotle. More specifically, on one hand there are remarks such as "what is brought forward as a source of convictions for the matter proposed itself needs another such source, which itself needs another, and so *ad infinitum*" made by Sextus at *PH* 1.166. On the other hand, there is something like "we are led back *ad infinitum* on the ground that we shall not understand because of the prior items if there are no primitives" issued by Aristotle at *Posterior Analytics* 72b5. A similar connection can be drawn in the case of the reciprocal mode at *PH* 1.169, where an object investigated is advanced as a support for the object investigated. Aristotle equally condemns this reasoning when he says that "it is impossible for the same thing at the same time to be both prior and posterior to something" at 72b25. Obviously, both authors part ways when considering the point from which demonstration begins, supposedly responsible for helping us in avoiding regresses and circles. Aristotle offers a thorough theory to explain where the regress ends. But Sextus holds, at some point, this is something merely assumed and so not justified *per se* (*PH* 1.168).

I won't enter into the details of Aristotle's theory in order to evaluate if Sextus' argumentation holds against it. My point is that Klein reasonably draws from these connections interesting consequences which I relate to CC and SCI. The first one is that, in accordance with Aristotle, Sextus does not occupy himself with explaining or arguing why regresses and circles are bad.<sup>9</sup> He takes it from Aristotle. Second, this is explained because Sextus structured these modes from within the Aristotelian background. He is arguing internal to the perspectives of those who hold that knowledge is possible. Finally, this explains why he dedicates more attention to show why there isn't the point of start or foundations which Aristotle claims to exist. Even though Sextus does not cite Aristotle's theory explicitly while displaying his arguments, the connection would be clear to any well-trained philosopher of the

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<sup>8</sup> Klein, "Epistemic Justification and the Limits of Pyrrhonism", 91.

<sup>9</sup> Klein, "Epistemic Justification and the Limits of Pyrrhonism", 85.

period. From these connections, Klein derives the already mentioned conclusion: Sextus comes up with a puzzle for those who endorse the Aristotelian view of knowledge's structure. Now, I think it is explicit that the modes are placed in the context where Sextus elaborated his writings. CC, then, is vindicated, and we see reason for us to interpret Sextus in line with SCI, since the line of argument bears on the theories subjectively available to those who are seeking knowledge or investigating.

However, the issue which is most problematic in this example is the further step taken by Klein. He reasons that, as Sextus doesn't take in consideration theories which appeal to circular reasoning or infinity regresses, the modes above described could not represent a problem for those who espouse these two views. Put differently, Sextus' skepticism would be limited. The previous examples may also entitle one to say that this is the result we get from subscribing to CC and SCI. However, I understand that, once the so called limitation is properly understood, it becomes more of a triumph for Pyrrhonism than a problem for the program.

A proper comprehension of this limitation begins with an attempt to criticize Klein's line of argument, along with CC and SCI. To do this, I propose that we imagine a framework that would not be dialectically dependent on Aristotle's epistemology. This different theoretical arrangement would encompass different principles which, by their turn, would dislodge the platform from which the Five Modes once were raised. However, the problem is that, as we turn our attention to the basic constituents of any framework, Pyrrhonism no longer seems limited as Klein takes it to be.

I think it is not a controversial claim to say that a common characteristic to every framework is that they are composed by principles. These are the basic constituents which help shaping the theoretical arrangement. The point made by Klein, then, is that Sextus is drawing the Five Modes from a framework built through Aristotelian principles. The most crucial among them suggests that it doesn't matter how much longer you can go by executing inferences. If the starting point does not possess a special feature, you gain nothing by making more inductions. Thus, this strategy recommends the following: come up with principles which do not carry this view, and the Five Modes will no longer be a skeptical problem.

Nevertheless, we still begin from principles and, here, Sextus may pose a very simple question which can explain why the Five Modes are not constrained as the argumentation so far wants us to conclude. And the following point does not require that we resort to the specificities of an assumed framework. The reason is that

principles possess a very basic characteristic: they instruct us in how to proceed when doing something. And, as such, they must inform us of a very simple thing, that is, a place from where we start. With this, the basic question which Sextus would offer is the following: what makes this starting point a good one?

I must explain why I think this would be the appropriate question and what it means. I shall say that I'm not resorting now to a problem of the criterion, that is, I'm not saying that Sextus is questioning the principle itself (although it is defensible to state that the problem of the criterion reenacts the puzzle offered by the Five Modes<sup>10</sup>). But, let's follow what seems to be the skeptic's *modus operandi* and see if a change in the principle delivers another framework, one that does not allow the puzzle of the Five Modes to take off.

So, suppose we abandon the requirement of a privileged starting point and attribute to justifying inference a different status, one which can be sustained regardless of the beginning of the chain of inferences. Thus, it is the way the inferences are made which counts now, not from where they began. In better terms, what matters now is the performance of the person and not the place from which she started. The problem, though, is that the person following these instructions could always conceive of a better performance, one which excels the previous obtained, and so on. It will look as if the present performance was never good enough, rendering the utmost level of performance something indefinite. Thus, it appears that the mode *ad infinitum* has its grip also in this new framework.

A different way of posing the same problem is by imagining that the conditions under which the inferences are made could always be improved. The reasoning follows again. We lost the track of the best conditions under which the performance would be optimal. As a step further seems always possible, it becomes indefinite where to draw a line. Observe that a kind of limitation emerges now. It is related to a normative ambiance, where the puzzle is to properly establish where the optimal performance lies. It is also a concern with the ought-implies-can relation, that is, what if the optimal performance is to outstrip our cognitive abilities? Thus, contrary to what was previously stated, it is not that Pyrrhonism is limited. Rather, as most forms of skepticism, it reveals our limitations. I try to better explain this in the next section.

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<sup>10</sup>. Cf. Andrew Cling, "Reasons, Regresses, and Tragedy: the Epistemic Regress Problem and the Problem of the Criterion", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol 46, No. 4 (October 2009): 333-346.

## 3.

In the very beginning, I mentioned two basic approaches to the works of Sextus Empiricus. One may try to interpret his writings in an effort to discern a coherent view of the arguments he presents. Alternately, one may try to articulate an analysis of these arguments, but with the intent of showing where Sextus errs—so, for the sake of producing anti-skeptical results. The latter depends on the former; that is, in order to say that Sextus is wrong, one has to rely on an interpretation of the writings. In the previous section, I offered an example of how this interchange might work. The example was relevant for two reasons. First, because it follows closely the two outcomes observed in the first section. Second, because it drives us towards the center of the matter which I wish to fully explore now.

The main issue is to explain what is wrong with the claim that Pyrrhonian skepticism is limited. It is true that, by following CC and SCI, we reach the view that the Five Modes very much reenact the Aristotelian standards to accomplish a successful proof. However, as the counter-example above illustrated, it does not follow that these modes are innocuous for any theory formulated from a different background. A plausible explanation for this might be found in a passage where Sextus makes comments about the Five Modes.

Sextus pauses in *Outlines* to address the scope of the Five Modes, offering an explanation which could help us understand why Pyrrhonism is, in fact, not limited. Sextus notes “that every object of investigation can be referred to these modes” (*PH* 1.169). To explain how, from *PH* 1.170 until *PH* 1.177, Sextus argues for a pattern of interaction among the modes. First, the modes of dispute and relativity describe the terrain of controversy which tends to prompt investigation, regardless of the matter investigated, that is, be it an object of perception or an object of thought. For, as the controversy persists, the possibility of its resolution seems to dim, and the suspension of judgement becomes the inevitable result. At *PH* 1.171-174, we can observe the three formal modes (Agrippa’s Trilemma) arising as exploring what follows from the attempts to eliminate dispute and relativity regarding the matter investigated. For if I state that *p* is the correct view, I shall offer a proof in favor of it. If the proof solely reinstates the object investigated, I display a circular reasoning which offers no conclusion. And If I simply state *p* without proof, nothing gets in the way of someone else doing the same. I’m, then, back to the differences which nurture dispute and relativity. I may still opt for the continuity of investigation. However, as I manage to avoid the problems just mentioned, I drive myself towards an infinite

sequence of proofs. This means only that no conclusion is obtained, and suspension of judgement becomes the inevitable result.

So, it seems that Pyrrhonian skepticism is not limited, because the Five Modes encompass any object of investigation, regardless of the background. However, a puzzling detail emerges in a comparison between two excerpts, one just cited and another one discussed in the last section. At first, they seem to yield conflicting views. But a plausible interpretation can eliminate this first impression. First, recall the evidence in favor of CC and SCI. At *PH* 1.202, Sextus is concerned about the scope of ‘every’ in the “the chief constitutive principle of scepticism” presented at *PH* 1.12, that is, “that to every account an equal account is opposed.” As shown, the ‘every’ concerns particularly the accounts the skeptic has inspected. Similar points are made at *PH* 1.198 and 1.200. However, an equal constraint is not imposed on the ‘every’ which features at *PH* 1.169, i.e., the one just mentioned in the last paragraph. Someone may say that at *PH* 1.202 and 1.12, when Sextus is concerned with opposing accounts, he is indirectly approaching the mode from dispute. For, in this mode, he opposes conflicting views and, as explained in these passages, these would only be the views he had scrutinized. But notice that in this case he refers to every *view* concerning *an* object of investigation. While the ‘every’ I am focused on is related to *objects of investigation*. Thus, oddly, the scope of his affirmation would encompass objects of investigation emerged in his inquiry, in the inquiries before his and in those yet to come. In the end, it looks as if the Five Modes are an exception to CC and SCI.

However, to exempt them from these constraints won’t bring good results, especially in terms of trying to structure a coherent view of Sextus’ skepticism. First, this would put Sextus in a position to say that “regardless of the matter investigated, the result will always be the same: suspension of judgment.” Some could say that this is exactly what this skeptic is trying to tell us, thereby explaining why the Five Modes represent a skeptical challenge. But a second point must be made before such conclusion. Recall that at *PH* 1.1-3 Sextus qualifies the skeptic as the one who is still investigating. Now, if every object of investigation can be referred to the Five Modes, *it surely becomes difficult to explain why the skeptic would be still investigating as the result is already known*—that is, that the matter will not be resolved, and the skeptic must suspend judgment. But a few more passages may clarify why the inquiry persists.

First, we should remember that, at *PH* 1.12, Sextus explains what prompts the “men of talent” to investigation. It is “the anomaly in things” which troubles and



puzzles them. Deciding these matters (believing) would put these inquirers in a tranquil state of mind. Moreover, it is useful to remind ourselves that, following this passage, at *PH* 1.13, Sextus notes that appearances can force feelings upon the skeptics, constraining them to assent, that “the skeptic gives assent to the feelings which are the necessary results of sense impressions.” What I wish to highlight with these two passages is that, even if I’m aware that every object of investigation can be brought under the Five Modes, the skeptic and those who seek knowledge can’t help feeling troubled by anomalies in appearances here and there. Thus, anyone who has sense perception would inevitably put themselves back in the path of investigation to recover their formerly tranquil state of mind, even if they were aware that their efforts would lead them towards the puzzlement of the Five Modes.

This way of eliminating the inconsistency may raise problems for Sextus. For, as Katja Vogt<sup>11</sup> explains, this would allow one to say that the skeptic is not really engaged in finding or even pursuing the truth. Rather, Sextus would be concerned solely with the tranquility of the soul, and not with genuine investigation. However, as Vogt herself reminds us, a lot depends on how one conceives investigation. If investigation is an endeavor which aims at the discovering truths, the charge becomes plausible. But, if investigation is taken as an activity which responds, through its norms, to the *value of truth*, then the accusation doesn’t follow so straightforwardly. For now the skeptic may claim that she hasn’t found the truth, because all the means available weren’t appropriate to do so. Suspension of judgment follows out of a respect for the *value of truth*, not attainable in the present moment. In a few passages, Sextus gives us reasons to hold to this interpretation. At *PH* 2.11, for example, when also discussing the feasibility of the skeptic’s investigation, he indicates “the reason why any investigation is undertaken” is that the inquirers don’t know the real nature of the objects, and they haven’t found no answer to this question. Besides, at *PH* 1.25, Sextus explains that the tranquility of the soul purports to be found as soon as the skeptic is able to discern the truth or falsity of the appearances. Thus, suspension of judgment is only one of the paths towards a tranquil soul, followed solely under circumstances where the other options fall short of success. One is a skeptic precisely because one is a genuine inquirer, one who values truth and pursues it.

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<sup>11</sup>. Katja Maria Vogt, “The Aims of Skeptical Investigation”, in *Pyrrhonism in Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Diego E. Machuca (New York: Springer, 2011), 33. This whole chapter offers more on the matter of investigation in Pyrrhonian skepticism than I can do at the present opportunity.

It seems, then, we have a plausible explanation for why the skeptic truly keeps investigating (as noted at *PH* 1.4), despite every object of investigation being captured in the Five Modes. It seems also that we achieved a good explanation of why Pyrrhonian skepticism is not limited in the way a purely dialectical interpretation would have it. But, still, this picture yields an incoherent view of the skeptic behavior, for we see someone who constantly begins a fight he knows he will lose, someone who takes on a task she can never complete. That is why I think now is the time to consider what exactly are the *limitations* Sextus addresses in his arguments. I think three basic points are helpful to understand this issue. First, it is wrong to say that Sextus is beginning a fight he knows he is going to lose. I'm afraid it is obvious now that he is simply entering an investigation. And, as with any investigation, he doesn't know where it is going to lead him. Otherwise, he wouldn't investigate, for he already knew the result.

Second, it is important to remember how Sextus broadly describes an object of investigation: "what we investigate is (...) what is said about what is apparent" (*PH* 1.19-20). I bring this quote once again in order to address an obvious similarity. Both the interpreter of Sextus and anyone disputing his arguments are also investigating what is said about something, be it apparent or not. Though it is an obvious point, it suffices to remind that the interpreter and the critic also have their objects of investigation under the scope of the Five Modes. A similar situation leads to a similar predicament. They might not be engaged in a lost battle, but the success of their investigation is heavily dependent on how they manage to deal with the modes of Agrippa. Because of that, suspension of judgment seems in the offing for them too.

Third and finally, it is also relevant to observe that, for example, maybe Klein sees the regress differently from Sextus. After all, these are two different inquirers who conducted investigations starting from different backgrounds, that is, the meaning of infinity in the mode *ad infinitum* might be differently seen by each investigator. It appears to me that Klein is more concerned with a flat-out infinity, a determined quantity, as it usually happens in the debate nowadays. However, Sextus seems to refer to something slightly but importantly distinct, once he uses the word *apeiron* which is more closely related to the boundlessness, the undetermined. It is hard to take this word as standing for the flat-out infinity expressed by Klein. It appears to be something more in the spirit of the skeptical posture defended by Sextus, whence he would not determine the existence of something ungraspable as an infinite length of proofs. Rather, he seems to indicate a non-conclusive situation,

associated with the boundlessness of his reasoning, from which would emerge aporia.

I concede it is not entirely clear the precise meaning of *apeiron* in this context. But I believe that what this reading of infinity suggests should not be confined to the *Outlines*. For it seems to deliver a common situation among the three investigations here analyzed: Sextus', the interpreter's and the disputant's. As Sextus argues at *PH* 1.85, the differences among our intellects are boundless as well. So, at each of these cases one comes from different backgrounds and one tends to see matters differently. An attempt to decide the correct one inevitably puts us in the route of boundlessness again, this time through the Five Modes. Thus, we are left with no starting point for our argument. And, even if we are free to start regardless of this, there does not seem to exist a conclusive and non-provisional point to interrupt our reasoning. Apparently, we are unable to escape the difficulties in which Sextus claimed to be. And there is nothing left to do but trying to understand how to deal with them, that is, keeping with the investigation.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> I thank all the participants of the Ancient Epistemology Workshop at Vanderbilt University for all their helpful comments and questions. I also have to thank the Fulbright Commission in Brazil, as well as the staff in the U.S., for allowing me to have this fantastic experience abroad, and CAPES, for the same support throughout my doctorate in Brazil.



# A GIFT FROM THE GODS: SOCRATIC KNOWLEDGE IN PLATO'S LATE DIALOGUES

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ABSTRACT: While much attention has been paid to the role of divine inspiration in the case of Socrates within Plato's early and middle period dialogues, this paper examines Plato's late period works and argues that despite the drastic changes in methodology found in dialogues such as the *Sophist* and *Philebus*, Plato still acknowledges, and emphasizes, the role played by divine inspiration in regard to Socratic knowledge.

KEYWORDS: Socrates, Late Dialogues, Divine Inspiration, *daimonion*

As Plato transitioned into his late period, the character of Socrates no longer consistently resides at center-stage of the dialogues. In dialogues such as the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, for example, we find in his place the Eleatic Stranger, an individual who utilizes a new methodology, i.e., collection and division, in his efforts towards the acquisition of definitional knowledge. Given the change in cast and methodology of the *Sophist*, *Statesman*, as well as the *Laws*<sup>1</sup>, it could be argued that Plato finally dismisses the more supernatural aspects of his earlier work<sup>2</sup>, favoring instead the

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in the *Laws*, Socrates is absent entirely. Also, while the method of collection and division is not used by the Athenian Stranger in the *Laws*, it is, in contrast to the earlier, and even middle periods, similarly rigid and meticulous in its presentation, lacking any traces of the elenctic questioning that drives those earlier dialogues.

<sup>2</sup> As evidence to this claim, we find that throughout the early and middle period dialogues, Socrates consistently adheres to the warnings issued by his *daimonion*. Textual examples of such reliance include, but are in no way limited to: *Apology* 31c4-32a3, *Euthydemus* 272e1-3a3, and *Phaedrus* 242b-c. In addition to his *daimonion*, Socrates also consistently recognizes the legitimacy of divine inspiration in the case of certain individuals. Examples of such instances can be found in the *Apology* (22b8-c4), as well as the *Ion* (534b1-c7). And, while some scholars, Martha Nussbaum, "Commentary on Edmunds," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium of Ancient Philosophy* (1985) 1: 231-240, perhaps most notably, have dismissed these references to divine inspiration as instances of Socratic Irony, given the consistency of textual evidence to the contrary, such a position is, I would argue, untenable. For a comprehensive and thoroughly convincing argument that Plato took divine inspiration seriously throughout his early and middle periods, see

rigidly rational methodology prominently featured therein. Yet, while both the Eleatic Stranger of the *Sophist* and *Statesman* and the Athenian Stranger of the *Laws*, do not themselves directly appeal to the divine for assistance in their philosophical endeavors<sup>3</sup>, when we turn our attention to those dialogues of the late period where Socrates takes center stage, we are subject once more to a consistent appeal to the divine for assistance in his philosophical endeavor. Given this disparity, the question arises as to Plato's views on Socrates in this late period, in particular the role that divine inspiration plays in the case of Socratic knowledge.

To answer this question, however, requires that we address a problem that arises in Plato's late period, i.e., the varying images of Socrates. To explain, in the late dialogues, we are given multiple images of Socrates, all of which are, at least on the surface, distinctly different than the last. In the *Sophist*, for example, we are presented with the image of Socrates as the 'noble sophist,' i.e., the individual who, through the elenchus, is able to purge his interlocutors of their false beliefs.<sup>4</sup> In the *Theaetetus*, on the other hand, a dialogue that serves as the dramatic predecessor to the *Sophist*, we are presented with a slightly different image, i.e., Socrates as

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Mark L. McPherran, *The Religion of Socrates* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), as well as Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here that despite the Athenian Stranger's lack of appeal to the divine for direct assistance in his own presentation of the laws, it is argued consistently throughout the laws that the gods and their supreme wisdom must serve as the foundation for the laws of men. See *Laws* 903bb-905d, 907a, 967b.

<sup>4</sup> While this is not explicitly stated to be describing Socrates in the dialogue itself, I would argue that we ought to understand the 6<sup>th</sup> definition as presented in the *Sophist* to be a description of Socrates. As we read at *Soph.* 230b3-c2, "They cross-examine someone when he thinks he is saying something though he is saying nothing. Then, since his opinions will vary inconsistently, these people will easily scrutinize them. They will collect his opinions together during the discussion, put them side by side, and show that they conflict with each other at the same time on the same subjects in relation to the same things and in the same respects. The people who are being examined see this, get angry at themselves, and become calmer towards others. They lose their inflated and rigid beliefs about themselves that way, and no loss is pleasanter to hear or has a more lasting effect on them."

For support of this view, see C.C.W. Taylor, "Socrates the Sophist," in *Remembering Socrates*, ed. Lindsay Judson and Vassilis Karasmanis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 168. See also Dorothea Frede, "The Hedonist's Conversion: The Role of Socrates in the *Philebus*," in *Form and Argument in Late Plato*, ed. Christopher Gill and M.M. McCabe (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 223. Frede notes that the 6<sup>th</sup> definition "seems to represent something like Plato's last word on Socrates."

midwife. Here, Socrates is able to assist in the delivery of wisdom from within the mind of his interlocutor. And, while this may seem similar to the 'noble sophist' as described in the *Sophist*, given the more positive capacity exhibited by the expertise of mental midwifery, such an image of Socrates appears markedly different from the strictly purgative Socrates of the *Sophist*. Finally, in the *Philebus*, we are yet again presented with a seemingly distinct Socrates, one who takes up the method of collection and division as his weapon of choice in the search for the definition of the good life. As before, this new image of Socrates seems to be set apart from his fellow late period Socratic counterparts, most notably in his apparent acceptance of the superiority of the method of collection and division over his traditional elenctic approach.

Yet, despite these seemingly disparate depictions of Socrates, I would argue that we ought to see these varying images as one and the same character, with each depiction highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of Plato's mentor as he has now come to see him. And, while this position will be argued in full in the pages to follow, it is important to note here at the outset that, regardless of the differences in methodology utilized by the varying depictions, there arises a common thread that carries through these late period Socratic dialogues, i.e., Socrates' unwavering appeal and adherence to his divine voice. Given this consistency despite all else, it is my position that Plato maintains his continued belief regarding the influence of divine inspiration in the case of Socrates.

### **Divine Inspiration in the Late Dialogues**

#### The Divine and the Statesman in the *Statesman*

Given the many changes that arise in Plato's late period, before turning our attention to Socrates in particular, it is necessary to first establish that Plato's recognition of the validity of divine inspiration is not limited to a nostalgic portrait of his mentor. To do so, we look first to two dialogues of Plato's late period that do not feature Socrates as its protagonist, the *Statesman* and the *Laws*.

Looking first to the *Statesman*, we find that, according to the Eleatic Stranger, the role of the divine is of significant importance to what Plato will regard as the true ruler.<sup>5</sup> As the stranger explains, in order to establish stability, the rulers must

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<sup>5</sup> In this argument I follow closely that of Stephan Büttner, "Inspiration and Inspired Poets in Plato's Dialogues," in *Plato and the Poets*, ed. Pierre Destree and F.G. Hermann (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011), 119-120.

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possess the ability to reconcile seemingly incompatible individuals under their rule.<sup>6</sup> As an example, the Stranger notes that, if not properly handled, a conflict will inevitably arise between those individuals who are more inclined towards the virtue of courage and those who favor a more moderate approach. While both courage and moderation are virtues to be praised, given the disparity between the two, the course of favored action between individuals occupying the opposing worldviews will quite often be in conflict. Thus, to avoid this potential confrontation, the ruler must possess the ability to ‘interweave’ the two together to create a harmony that is conducive to each individual, as well as the society at large.

In response to the question posed in the dialogue by Young Socrates as to how the ruler is able to peacefully mix these two dichotomous individuals together, the Stranger explains that the ruler has two options: (1) through creating a mortal bond between the two, i.e., by uniting them through marriage,<sup>7</sup> and (2) by “fitting together that part of their soul that is eternal with a divine bond.”<sup>8</sup> To elaborate on precisely what is meant by the forging of a “divine bond,” the stranger explains as follows:

I call divine, when it comes to be in souls, that opinion about what is fine and good, and the opposite of these, *which is really true and guaranteed*; it belongs to the class of the more human...Then we do recognize that it belongs to the statesman and the good legislator alone to be capable of bringing this thing about, by means of the music that belongs to the art of kingship, in those that had their correct share of education.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the statesman possesses the ability to instill within the citizenry the correct opinions on matters of the Good, Beauty, Justice, etc., which, in turn, will prevent them from veering off into the extreme form of whatever virtue they may naturally favor. So, for instance, lacking in such guidance, the courageous individual will, through unchecked aggression, eventually become more of a beast than a man.<sup>10</sup> As such, it is the responsibility of the true statesman to introduce the courageous individual to ideas that properly highlight the benefit of a more moderate approach in certain instances, to educate him in such a way as to instill a

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<sup>6</sup> *Pol.* 308d-309c.

<sup>7</sup> *Pol.* 310b2-4.

<sup>8</sup> *Pol.* 309c1-2.

<sup>9</sup> *Pol.* 309c4-d5.

<sup>10</sup> *Pol.* 309e1-4.



balance in his soul.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note, however, that the Statesman is not claimed to possess the *knowledge* of these things, but rather, merely the correct *opinions*. Thus, we are provided the image of the divinely inspired individual who, while lacking knowledge of their own, is in possession of *correct* opinions, i.e., they have access to truth.<sup>12</sup> Further, given the sincerity of this description, not to mention the pivotal role this divinely gifted skill of interweaving plays for the stranger in the final definition of the true statesman, that Plato would ironically attribute this ability to divine provenance seems distinctly improbable.<sup>13</sup>

### Divine Inspiration in the *Laws*

In addition to the role of the divine in the *Statesman*, we also find instances within the *Laws* wherein the Athenian Stranger<sup>14</sup> specifically refers to divine inspiration.

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<sup>11</sup> While there are indeed differences between the *Republic* and the *Laws*, I would contend that the two texts are, in fact, surprisingly similar, a point which can be seen here in the stated importance that the soul, and the balancing thereof, plays in the establishment of justice in the polis. For more on the similarities between the *Laws* and *Republic*, see Daniel Larkin, "Paint Him? I Hardly Know Him: Reconciling Plato's Aesthetics in the *Laws* and *Republic* Book X," Paper presented at the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Conference, New York, NY, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> See Büttner, "Inspiration and Inspired Poets," 120. Büttner adds that such an image of the true statesman, i.e., one that, through a connection to the divine is in possession of correct opinions, and, as such, is able to properly guide his subjects in matters of ethics and morality, is consistent with earlier depictions of the divine ruler, most notably in the *Meno* 98e7-99d.

<sup>13</sup> Büttner, "Inspiration and Inspired Poets," 120.

<sup>14</sup> It has been suggested by some scholars (such as Leo Strauss, *The Argument and the Action of Plato's Laws*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), and Thomas L. Pangle, "The Political Psychology of Religion in Plato's *Laws*," *American Political Science Review* 70, 4 (1976): 1059-77) that the Athenian Stranger represents Socrates. In support of this position, Aristotle's *Politics* 1265a is often referenced, as, transitioning from his analysis of the *Republic* to the *Laws* Aristotle writes, "Now it is true that all the discourses of Socrates possess brilliance, cleverness, originality and keenness of inquiry, but it is no doubt difficult to be right about everything." However, while this passage might be seen as Aristotle identifying Socrates as the Athenian Stranger, we find that Aristotle never explicitly states this connection. Further, later on in this same passage, Aristotle refers to the author of the *Laws* as 'the writer,' whereas in his description of the *Republic* the preceding passage, Aristotle consistently identifies Socrates by name. Additionally, given Plato's willingness to use Socrates in other late dialogues, it would seem odd that he would, in his final work, feel the need to hide Socrates behind a curtain of anonymity. In support of this position, see also Kevin M. Cherry, "Politics and Philosophy in Aristotle's Critique of Plato's *Laws*," in *Natural Right and Political Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Catherine Zuckert and Michael Zuckert*, ed. Ann Ward and Lee Ward (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 50-66. On Cherry's

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To begin, we look to 682a, where we read:

He (Homer) composed these lines... under some sort of inspiration from God. And how true to life they are! This is because poets, as a class are divinely gifted and are inspired when they sing, so that with the help of Graces and Muses they frequently hit on how things really happen.

Here we find direct testimony regarding the ability to those divinely inspired to gain access to truth. Note, however, the Stranger is not claiming that such moments of divine revelation result in the acquisition of knowledge, a point which is once more strikingly consistent with comments regarding divine inspiration as seen in the earlier dialogues, most notably the *Apology*.<sup>15</sup> Yet, while the divinely inspired may lack *knowledge* insofar as he cannot provide an account for that which is gifted to him, he nevertheless stumbles upon the truth, an occurrence that arises with such consistency that it cannot be reduced to mere coincidence or luck.

Interestingly, that Plato takes such moments of actual inspiration seriously is made clear in another passage found later in the *Laws*, one that serves as a *warning of the potential dangers* that arise from adhering to the revelations as given by the gods. We read at 719c:

When a poet takes his seat on the tripod of the muse, he cannot control his thoughts. He is like a fountain where the water is allowed to gush forth unchecked. His art is the art of representation, and when he represents men with contrasting characters he is often obliged to contradict himself, and he does not know which of the opposing speeches contains the truth. But for the legislator this is impossible, he must not let his law say two different things on the same subject.

From this section we might glean a number of important points. First, while the passage does indicate that the inspired poet cannot determine which of his gifted revelations contains the truth, we do find the Stranger indirectly noting that the truth *is revealed*. The problem, then, is not the source of the revelation, nor the potential veracity of such revelation, but rather the inspired individual's lack of understanding. In other words, we are once again given evidence that Plato, through the Athenian Stranger, recognizes that the truth can be, and is, revealed through moments of divine inspiration. Second, it is admittedly true that this passage is presented with an admonitory tone, warning us that the legislator cannot rely on divine inspiration in matters of law, as the contradictory accounts that so often

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view, "What (Aristotle) finds most praiseworthy about the Socratic dialogues—their searching, or zetetic character—seems to be wholly absent from the *Laws*."

<sup>15</sup> *Ap.* 22c1-3.

accompany revelation would be detrimental to the consistency required for a stable constitution. However, while this warning clearly indicates a hesitancy to rely upon divinely inspired revelation for matters of law, it does not condemn such revelation as chicanery, but rather, once more indicates a sincere belief in its legitimacy, albeit one that should be approached with caution.

### Images of Socrates in the Late Dialogues

With the evidence from the *Statesman* and the *Laws* now established, we can proceed on to our analysis of Socrates and the role of divine inspiration in Plato's late dialogues. As noted above, while he is often silent, or even absent, from many of the later dialogues, he is very much present in others. This is most apparent in the *Theaetetus*, a dialogue which dramatically precedes the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, and in the *Philebus*, an oddly 'Socratic' dialogue wherein Socrates, though similar in many ways to the Socrates of the early period,<sup>16</sup> often substitutes the elenchos for the new method of division. In addition to these two obvious examples, I would add a third, i.e., the image of Socrates as indirectly presented via the 6<sup>th</sup> definition of sophistry as found in the *Sophist*. And, while these three presentations of Socrates may, at first glance, strike us as three distinct representations of Socrates, I would argue that, when viewed through the lens of divine inspiration, these somewhat disparate images of Socrates are revealed as one and the same, each image providing a deeper insight into Plato's late understanding of his mentor, and the role that divine inspiration plays in his philosophical endeavors and ability.

### Setting the Stage for Change: Socrates as Midwife in the *Theaetetus*

In terms of chronological events within the dialogues, the *Theaetetus* is the direct predecessor to the *Sophist* and *Statesman*. And, given the *Sophist* and *Statesman* both feature the Eleatic Stranger as its protagonist, it is of note that the *Theaetetus* features Socrates front and center, leading a discussion regarding the definition of

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<sup>16</sup> See Frede, "The Hedonist's Conversion," 215. Frede notes a number of striking similarities that are almost nostalgic in effect: (1) The dialogue begins abruptly, which recalls similar literary approaches as found in the *Meno* and *Gorgias*. (2) Socrates claims that moral mistakes are involuntary (22b). (3) The different pleasures and kinds of knowledge are afforded the opportunity to speak for themselves, which, as Frede notes, ought to remind us of the *Crito*, wherein the Laws themselves are personified.

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knowledge. Interestingly, despite its late placement in the Platonic corpus, in many ways the *Theaetetus* may strike the reader as fairly reminiscent of the earlier Socratic dialogues, for not only is the dialogue fairly elenctic in nature, but further, it ends in aporia!<sup>17</sup>

Yet, despite this familiar *mise-en-scene*, if examined closely, it becomes apparent that this familiarity is actually a forerunner of change for Plato, not only in terms of a break from the middle period,<sup>18</sup> but also as an indication of the need for new developments, i.e., the methodology found predominantly in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*.<sup>19</sup> In defense of this position, let us look first to the image of Socrates we are presented with at the beginning of the dialogue: Socrates as midwife.

Typically speaking, a midwife is an individual who is instrumental in the birthing process, not only in their ability to rightly determine when a woman is pregnant, but further, and more importantly, aides in the delivery of that child. Regarding the midwifery of Socrates, however, there are some critical differences. As Socrates explains:

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<sup>17</sup> *Tht.* 210a8-b2. While the dialogue does successfully determine what knowledge is not, i.e., perception, true judgment, or an account added to true judgment, the discussion fails to find a satisfactory definition of knowledge. Also, given the contextual connection to the *Sophist* and the significant change in cast and methodology that comes with that dialogue, the methodology used by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, and its failure to achieve satisfactory results in the eyes of the interlocutors, is, I believe, of significant importance. For the contrary position, i.e., that the *Theaetetus* does end with a positive account of knowledge (or at the very least, *human* knowledge) see David Sedley, *The Midwife of Platonism: Text and Subtext in Plato's Theaetetus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> M.F. Burnyeat, "Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 24 (1977): 7-16, argues that Plato appears to distance himself from the metaphysical commitments he introduced in his middle period, e.g., the theory of recollection, as well as, to an extent, the theory of the forms. Indeed, we see this at *Tht.* 188a, where the idea of recollection is somewhat dismissed outright. Further, and of particular interest, Burnyeat draws the distinction between the image of the barren midwife in the *Theaetetus* and that of the pregnant Socrates of the *Symposium*. In both dialogues, the imagery of pregnancy and delivery are used to explain the development of ideas, however, whereas in the *Symposium*, Socrates seems to be in possession of the wisdom himself, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* cannot make such a claim, as he admits that he is barren. I agree with Burnyeat that this revisiting of theme is not coincidental, and would add that this once more indicates that Plato is rethinking and breaking from his more positive account of the Socratic method as found in the middle period.

<sup>19</sup> Granted, the method of collection and division is utilized by Socrates in the *Philebus*. However, it is my contention that such use only further proves the point that Socrates is ill equipped to use the methodology, as his inability to utilize it properly shows.

## A Gift from the Gods: Socratic Knowledge in Plato's Late Dialogues

The difference is that I attend to men, not women, and that I watch over the labor of their souls, not of their bodies. And the most important thing about my art is the ability to apply all possible tests to the offspring, to determine whether the young mind is being delivered of a phantom, that is, an error, or a fertile truth.<sup>20</sup>

In short, Socrates aids in the delivery of wisdom, guiding his interlocutors in the development of their own beliefs and ideas. Further, in line with his consistent disavowal of knowledge, Socrates admits that, similar to actual midwives' inability to have children themselves, he is himself barren of all wisdom. Thus, Socrates explains, when an interlocutor does succeed in the discovery of wisdom through their interaction, it is not *from Socrates* that this wisdom arose, but from within the interlocutor alone.<sup>21</sup>

However, while Socrates adamantly maintains that any wisdom delivered is not his own, he does insist that he plays a critical role in the discovery of truth. As evidence to this claim Socrates points to those individuals who, failing to recognize the role of Socrates in the delivery process, mistakenly believe that the truth was discovered by their work alone. By Socrates' account, these unfortunate pupils who leave his tutelage prematurely, believing themselves to be fully capable of delivering additional truths without the assistance of their former midwife, are destined to fall back into the very ignorance from which he so selflessly delivered them. As Socrates explains:

After they have gone away from me they have resorted to harmful company, with the result that what has remained in them has miscarried; while they have neglected the children I helped them bring forth, and lost them, because they set more value upon lies and phantoms than upon the truth; finally they have been set down for ignorant fools, both by themselves and by everyone else.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, based on this testimony, it is clear that Socrates believes that he plays a fundamental role in the delivery of wisdom from the minds of his interlocutors.

Yet, this certainty on the part of Socrates regarding his role in both the delivery, and rearing, of truth should strike us as perplexing. Given his admitted lack of wisdom, questions arise as to how Socrates is able to (1) exude such confidence in his ability, (2) successfully determine who is (and is not) worthy of his tutelage, and (3) successfully determine which ideas are in fact true. And, similar to the evidence found in the early dialogues regarding Socrates' seemingly inexplicable abilities, we

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<sup>20</sup> *Tht.* 150b7-c3.

<sup>21</sup> *Tht.* 150d6-7.

<sup>22</sup> *Tht.* 150e2-151a.

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find that the answer to each of these questions arises through an appeal to divine inspiration.

Beginning with the first inquiry regarding the confidence exuded by Socrates regarding his own abilities, we find that, similar to statements made as early as the *Apology*,<sup>23</sup> the reason why the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* engages in such mental midwifery is that he is *compelled* by the god to do so.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, as Socrates notes, not only is his engagement in mental midwifery ordered by the god, but further, it is the god himself that leaves Socrates barren.<sup>25</sup> Thus, given this lack of wisdom, it cannot be the case that Socrates, in recognition of his *own* wisdom, feels obligated to instruct others. Rather, it is divine command alone that serves as the catalyst, spurring him on towards the assisting of young minds in the development of their ideas. And, given Socrates' belief in the superiority of divine wisdom to human wisdom,<sup>26</sup> a point made clear to Socrates throughout his life via the advice of his *daimonion*, the origin of Socrates' confidence regarding his role as midwife is made quite clear.

Moving now to the question of Socrates' determination of which students are worthy of his assistance, we find once more Socrates directly attributing this ability to the divine. As we read at 151a1-6:

Sometimes (those that leave) come back, wanting my company again, and ready to move heaven and earth to get it. When that happens, in some cases the divine sign that visits me forbids me to associate with them; in others, it permits me, and then they begin to make progress.

We see here, yet again, direct testimony to the involvement of the *daimonion* in the decision making process of Socrates. What is also of interest here is the similarity to the description of the *daimonion* as understood in the early dialogues, both dissuading Socrates from engaging in activities that he ought to avoid,<sup>27</sup> as well as the more positive act of permitting other action.<sup>28</sup> The point here is that we find a continued acceptance of Socratic appeal to the divine in these later dialogues, an

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<sup>23</sup> See Zina Giannopoulou, *Plato's Theaetetus as a Second Apology* (Oxford University Press, 2013), for a critical comparison of the *Theaetetus* and *Apology*.

<sup>24</sup> *Tht.* 150c9, *Ap.* 30e, 28e, 29d.

<sup>25</sup> *Tht.* 150c8.

<sup>26</sup> *Ap.* 23a4-b2.

<sup>27</sup> For example, engaging in a life of politics. See *Ap.* 31c4-32a3

<sup>28</sup> As we find at *Ap.* 40c1, Socrates notes that the *silence* of his divine sign is to be taken as affirmation of his course of action.

acceptance that is consistent in manner and tone. In other words, if it were the case that Plato were trying to distance himself from the more fantastical aspects of Socrates' ability from the early dialogues, one might think that by the time he set out to write the *Theaetetus*, an intricately woven treatise on the nature of human knowledge, such whimsical references to the supernatural would be absent, or at the very least relegated to a significantly diminished role. However, given Socrates' consistent and unapologetic appeals to the wisdom of such divine insight, it is difficult to see how such a claim could withstand this blatant textual evidence to the contrary.

Finally, we look to the most interesting of the above concerns, i.e., how Socrates, a man who lacks all wisdom himself, is able to determine which ideas are true, and which are false. To answer this, let us look very briefly to the methodology employed by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*. In the *Theaetetus* we are once more presented with a Socrates who consistently admits his own ignorance, knowing nothing of the topic at hand himself.<sup>29</sup> And, while this may not seem a remarkable point, we find that such consistent admissions of absolute ignorance are, in a way, a return to form for Socrates. To explain, while the earlier dialogues are rife with such pleas of ignorance, as Plato develops into his middle period, we find a change in the character of Socrates as well.<sup>30</sup> Specifically, in such middle period dialogues as the *Meno*, *Republic*, and *Symposium*, we find Socrates now holding a variety of metaphysical commitments, e.g., recollection, the forms, etc., that neither the Socrates of the early dialogues, nor the Socrates found in the *Theaetetus* maintain. Thus, with the image of Socrates as midwife we find Plato giving up on many of the conventions introduced in his middle period, conventions that, I would argue, were used as attempts to build upon the Socratic method, allowing for a more positive methodology, as opposed to one used merely to expose the inconsistencies in the beliefs of others.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the Socrates of the *Theaetetus* does not possess any wisdom of his own. Thus, he does not, and *cannot*, impregnate his interlocutors with his own ideas as sophists do,<sup>32</sup> but rather, merely assists in the delivery via the elenctic form of questioning more reminiscent of his earlier engagements.

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<sup>29</sup> *Tht.* 151c4-d1, 161b1-b4, 161e5-8, 184b.

<sup>30</sup> Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Cornell Studies in Classical Philology, 50 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 46-49. See also, Burnyeat, "Socratic Midwifery."

<sup>31</sup> See also, Burnyeat, "Socratic Midwifery," 57.

<sup>32</sup> *Tht.* 151b.

Yet, despite his lack of wisdom, we recall that, in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates *does* claim that he is able to determine which ideas are worthy and which should be discarded. Since such determination cannot be the result of his own wisdom (as he admits none of his own), I would once more suggest that, on the view of Socrates, this inexplicable ability is made possible, at least in part, by divine assistance, a claim which, again, is admitted to by Socrates himself.<sup>33</sup> This claim is supported by a number of factors: (1) As noted above, in his description of his own ability, Socrates consistently refers to divine influence as a major component of his craft. (2) The image of Socrates as midwife that we are presented with in the *Theaetetus* is quite similar to the Socrates of the early dialogues, i.e., an individual who, unlike the more protreptic figure of the middle dialogues, is able to properly guide his interlocutor away from false beliefs without admitting any wisdom of his own, yet, is effectively guided by his divine sign. And, (3) given Plato's acceptance of divine inspiration as a plausible source of assistance in these earlier works,<sup>34</sup> when we consider the nostalgic portrayal of Socrates found in the *Theaetetus*, it stands to reason that we ought take Socrates (and thus Plato) at his word regarding the role of the divine in the case of Socrates in the *Theaetetus*.

#### Evidence from the *Philebus*

Yet, while the *Theaetetus* might provide us with an image of Socrates as reliant upon divine inspiration, the image of the midwife is not the only version of Socrates we are given in the late period. Indeed, in what would seem to be a directly contradictory image to the classically elenctic Socrates of the *Theaetetus*, we find in the *Philebus* a Socrates that seems to do away with the elenchos altogether in favor of the method of collection and division! Yet, despite these disparate appearances, I would argue that the evidence in the *Philebus* only lends additional support to my position. My reasons are as follows: (1) Socrates is not especially adept in his deployment of the method of division, a lack of expertise which I will argue only helps prove my position that Plato does not consider Socrates to be a philosopher in the unqualified sense at this later stage of Plato's development. (2) While Socrates does indeed use the new method of collection and division, to aid in his progress he consistently appeals to, and relies upon, divine assistance. Thus, while the Socrates of the *Philebus*, insofar as he discards the elenchos in favor of the

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<sup>33</sup> *Tht.* 150d7-e2. See also Burnyeat, "Socratic Midwifery," 60-61. Burnyeat here points to such a possibility, though he does not strongly commit.

<sup>34</sup> See n. 2



method of collection and division, may, *prima facie*, appear to be in direct opposition to the image of Socrates as depicted in the 6<sup>th</sup> definition of the *Sophist* (let alone the midwife of the *Theaetetus*), I would argue that upon closer examination, the seemingly different images of Socrates we are given are not as disparate as they might first appear.

### Socrates and the Method of Division

It is widely accepted that the *Philebus* should be counted amongst Plato's latest dialogues.<sup>35</sup> Given the dialogue's placement in the corpus, and, considering the diminished role of Socrates in the late period, the question arises as to why Plato would choose Socrates as his protagonist. In answer to this question, some scholars have suggested that perhaps the reemergence of Socrates is owed to the ethical nature of the discussion at hand.<sup>36</sup> Yet, while I do agree that the earlier dialogues do *primarily* focus on more practical matters, such concerns are not entirely absent in the late period, especially when taking the overall project of the *Laws* into consideration.<sup>37</sup> If the sole reason for Socrates' resurrection was simply on account of the topic's connection to more traditionally Socratic themes, then it seems odd to render him silent or absent entirely from other dialogues which feature similar connections to earlier dialogues.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See Leonard Brandwood, *The Chronology of Plato's Dialogues* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and G.R. Ledger, *Re-counting Plato: A Computer Analysis of Plato's Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), cited in Frede, "The Hedonist's Conversion," 214.

<sup>36</sup> R.A.H. Waterfield, "The Place of the 'Philebus' in Plato's Dialogues", *Phronesis* 25, no. 3 (1980): 270-305.

<sup>37</sup> It should be noted that Socrates' general interest in matters pertaining to ethics does not preclude his interest in other, more theoretical fields of inquiry. For example, there is evidence to suggest that Socrates, as early as the *Euthyphro*, was very much concerned with epistemological issues, as well as matters of methodology. It is perhaps too long of an argument to make in full here, however, I will point out that we need think only of Socrates' response to Euthyphro's first attempt to define piety. On Socrates' view, Euthyphro's first attempt fails to capture the definition of piety itself, as it is merely an example of an action that might be considered pious. Indeed, given Socrates' attention to acquiring the proper definition, one that satisfies the definitional requirements stipulated by Socrates, it is not altogether clear that we can entirely divorce the epistemological from the moral in these early dialogues.

<sup>38</sup> See Frede, "The Hedonist's Conversion," 215. On Frede's view, not only would Socrates, on these grounds, be qualified to lead the discussion regarding the ideal state as found in the *Laws*, but similarly, in the *Timaeus* 19b-20c, Socrates would appear qualified and willing to discuss the ideal state, and yet, passes this duty on to Timaeus and Critias.

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Given the implausibility of the above suggestion, I would argue that there must exist other reasons as to Plato's selection of Socrates in the *Philebus*. And, in this vein, I agree with Dorothea Frede's claim that Plato's use of Socrates in the *Philebus* was, at least in part, to distinguish Socrates from the master dialectician.<sup>39</sup> To quickly recap, while Socrates does indeed discuss the 'divine method' of division, and further, uses it throughout the dialogue to determine the proper ranking of goods,<sup>40</sup> the dialogue ends with Protarchus noting to Socrates that the task is not complete, and that Socrates should continue on to finish what he started.<sup>41</sup> And, while this incomplete result is fairly common (if not expected) for a 'Socratic' dialogue, when compared to the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, two dialogues that feature the same method of collection and division, we find the conclusions to be strikingly different, as both dialogues end with a clear agreement that a definition has been reached by the Eleatic Stranger. Looking first to the *Sophist* 268c7-268d, we find the following exchange to close out the dialogue:

VISITOR: Shall we weave his name together from start to finish and tie it up the way we did before?

THEAETETUS: Of Course.

VISITOR: Imitation of the contrary-speech producing, insincere and unknowing sort, of the appearance making kind of copy making, the word juggling part of production that's marked off as human and not divine. Anyone who says the sophist is of this 'blood and family' will be saying, it seems, the complete truth.

THEAETETUS: Absolutely.

Further, a definitive conclusion of this sort is echoed in the *Statesman* as well, for, at the end of the *Statesman*, following the final recap of their efforts towards defining the statesman, Socrates himself responds as follows at 311c4-7: "Another most excellent portrait, visitor, this one that you have *completed* for us, of the man who possesses the art of kingship: the statesman."<sup>42</sup>

We find then a striking contrast between the three dialogues: While all three dialogues feature the method of division, only those wherein it is the Eleatic stranger leading the discussion does the discussion conclude definitively. On the other hand, in the *Philebus*, where it is Socrates, not the Stranger, using the method of division,

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<sup>39</sup> See Frede, "The Hedonist's Conversion," 229-232.

<sup>40</sup> *Phil* 66a-d.

<sup>41</sup> *Phil.* 67b.

<sup>42</sup> Italics added for emphasis.

we are left wanting, as the dialogue ends in incompleteness. Given this inconclusiveness, I would once more state that this is precisely the point, i.e., that Plato, through his use of Socrates in this way, is demonstrating the need for a mastery of this new method if one is to achieve definitive results. And, given his affinity for Socrates, and the skill exhibited by Socrates throughout Plato's corpus, that Socrates would be shown to be inefficient is perhaps that most compelling way for Plato to emphasize this point.

### The Role of Divine Inspiration in the *Philebus*

Yet, while it is true that Socrates ultimately fails to bring about the definitive conclusion presented in other late dialogues, I would argue that we are not to take this failure as an indication that Plato has lost faith in the methodology or ability of his mentor. In fact, I would suggest that, similar to the depictions of Socrates we are given in the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*, the Socrates of the *Philebus* is presented as a reflection of Plato's mature understanding of his teacher, one which, as with those other depictions already described, once more prominently features an attention to the role of divine inspiration in the methodology of Socrates.

To begin, it should be noted that, despite his failure to properly execute the method of division, Socrates is still able to proceed quite far into the discussion. This ability to do so despite his lack of expertise is particularly interesting, especially when we consider Socrates' consistent appeal to the divine throughout the dialogue: (1) The method itself is called, by Socrates, the "divine method" (18b6), (2) there is a prayer for divine assistance to help establish the fourfold division of all being (25b), (3) Socrates consistently refers to the difference between the human and divine mind (22c), and (4) Socrates appeals to the differences between the divine and human ideal condition (33b).<sup>43</sup> In this evidence we see, once again, that Socrates, even when utilizing the new, rigid method of division, does not waver from his appreciation of divine assistance.

Yet, while this attention to divine influence should be of no surprise at this point in the case of Socrates, we are presented with one extraordinary piece of textual evidence that demands our attention. Following his praiseful description of the divine method of division, we find, now faced with a potential roadblock in their discussion, Socrates, abandoning the method of division, proclaims that they

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<sup>43</sup> Frede, "The Hedonist's Conversion," n. 36. It should be added that points (3) and (4), while not directly related to divine assistance, do reinforce the idea that Socrates would take seriously the wisdom of the divine over human wisdom.

need not be concerned, as, “some memory has come to my mind *that one of the gods seems to have sent me to help us.*”<sup>44</sup> This single line is of exceptional importance as, in striking contrast to the apotroptic messages of the *daimonion* in which Socrates was warned against a particular course of action, here, in the *Philebus*, we are given textual evidence wherein Socrates is claiming to have received a *positive* message directly from the gods. And, in the context of the dialogue, this revelation bestowed upon Socrates, i.e., that neither pleasure nor knowledge is the good, but rather a third thing which is superior to both, is instrumental for the remainder of the discussion.

Granted, one could argue that such a direct appeal to the divine ought to be taken as an ironic gesture. However, given the staggering amount of evidence that has been presented against such a claim, evidence that is found throughout the entire Platonic corpus, such a claim seems, to me, to be particularly unfounded. Thus, instead of approaching this problem from a skeptic’s perspective, I suggest that we take this moment of positive divine influence with the utmost sincerity, as doing so would provide us insight into how we are to understand Socrates in Plato’s later dialogues. To explain, as we have seen, the Socrates of the *Philebus* is presented as not entirely skilled regarding the method of division. And yet, he is able to continue the discussion significantly further than would be expected for someone lacking in expertise. And, while this lack in ability would have crippled other individuals, Socrates, through the direct assistance of the gods, is able to proceed onward.

The point I am attempting to convey here is that, in the *Philebus*, we are given insight into Plato’s understanding of his mentor. To explain, as I have argued, as Plato progressed into his late period, his conception of philosophy has evolved. As such, he has come to realize that Socrates can no longer qualify as the embodiment of what the philosopher ought be in an unqualified sense. In short, Plato came to realize that the Socratic method, while useful for tearing down fallacious arguments and exposing inconsistencies in the beliefs of others, is unable to achieve the sort of definitional knowledge he desired. And yet, despite this inability, Socrates does *seem* to know things, i.e., his opinions and instincts always seem to be inexplicably pointed towards the truth. To account for this then, what we find in these late dialogues are images of Socrates wherein the role played by divine inspiration is placed front and center. Here in the *Philebus* we see evidence of Socrates, unable to push forward in the discussion, *directly assisted by the gods*. Whereas others would have faltered, or given up, Socrates, through divine revelation is able to continue.

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<sup>44</sup> *Phil.* 20b3-4. Italics added for emphasis.

And, it should be noted, that this revelation occurs must be seen as positive in the eyes of Plato. In other words, while it is true that Socrates must rely on divine assistance to proceed in the discussion, such assistance does not diminish the results of the discussion, especially when one considers the reverence shown by Plato to the wisdom of the gods.

Yet, while Plato does, in the case of Socrates, hold such divine revelation in high esteem, it is my view that he recognizes the limitations and potential pitfalls of reliance upon those few fortunate individuals lucky enough to be so inspired. Indeed, we might glean insight into this view when we consider the ending of the *Philebus*, wherein we recall that, despite Socrates being able to rank the various types of goods, Protarchus reminds him that his task is incomplete. To explain, we recall that in the *Sophist* and *Statesman*, an emphasis was placed on maintaining the proper divisions all the way through to the conclusion. In other words, the method of division is so effective because each division can be traced back and explained to any who would inquire. In the *Philebus*, however, we recall that the initial idea that spawned the discussion, i.e., that neither pleasure or knowledge alone was the good, was *given* to Socrates by divine inspiration. As such, this wisdom is not possessed by Socrates, and is thus unexplainable. No account can be given, and so, the division cannot be considered complete. Thus, while *Socrates*, via his divine connection, is able to proceed further in the discussion than the uninspired many, and, while this can be positive given the possibilities such inspiration provide,<sup>45</sup> Plato recognizes the need for a methodology that does not rely on the assistance of the divine, hence his development of the method of division.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

Thus, despite the limitations that may be related to reliance upon divine inspiration in matters of philosophy, it is quite clear that, in the case of Socrates, Plato still recognizes its value. Indeed, when we look to the three major images of Socrates presented in the late dialogues, we find that, despite surface discrepancies, the common link between them is their reliance upon and reverence for the divine. As

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<sup>45</sup> See *Phaedrus* 243e-245b. In Socrates' Second Speech, Philosophy is described as a form of madness. See also Francisco Gonzales, "The Hermeneutics of Madness," in *Plato and the Poets*, ed. Pierre Destree and F.G. Hermann (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Additionally, we are left without the precise ratios between pleasure and knowledge.

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such, we find cause to take seriously the role of the divine in the case of Socrates in Plato's late dialogues.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The objection might be raised here that we ought to understand the dialogues in a more skeptical light, especially given the more aporetic nature of the majority of the so-called Socratic dialogues. In this view, my position, which depends on seeing Plato (and by extension, the character of Socrates) as holding firm convictions regarding theological beliefs, arises as problematic. In response to this critique, however, we might look to the *Laws*, wherein we find evidence to support the contrary position, i.e., that Plato, especially in these late dialogues, does in fact posit such convictions sincerely.

To begin, we find a concerted effort on the part of the Stranger throughout the *Laws* to prove that the gods do exist, and that, their supreme wisdom and control over the universe should serve as the basis from which the laws of men be established. See *Laws* 903bb-905d, 907a, 967b. See also Büttner, "Inspiration and Inspired Poets". Büttner calls attention to *Laws* 811c, wherein, in defense of the legitimization of the constitution thus far constructed, the Stranger notes that their discussion has "not been conducted without a certain breath of the gods." As Büttner argues, considering the context here, it seems unlikely that we are to take this claim ironically. See also Christopher Bobonich, *Plato's Utopia Recast: His Later Ethics and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002).

Yet, this position is perhaps made most clearly in those instances wherein the Athenian Stranger is describing the various punishments to be levied upon those individuals who *dishonor* the gods, whether that offense arise as atheism, theft from a temple, or even the practicing of improper rituals, should be subjected to capital punishment. And, the strictest of these punishments is reserved for the atheist, as such an individual "...deserves to die for his sins not once or twice, but many times..." (*Laws* 908e2-3) Further, this condemnation for atheism should not be taken lightly, for, while there are other offenses Plato believes deserving of capital punishment aside from those pertaining to impiety, e.g., premeditated murder (871d), wounding a family member with the intention of murder (877b7-9), and waging a private war without the backing of the state (955c), that the punishment for atheism should be more severe than the punishment for violent charges is quite telling. Given the severity and consistency of this evidence, we have cause to take such references to the divine as sincere, especially in the late Platonic dialogues.

I would like to thank Hal Thorsrud for his insightful comments which raised this issue to my attention.

# SKEPTICAL FIDEISM IN CICERO'S *DE NATURA DEORUM*

Brian RIBEIRO

ABSTRACT: The work of Richard H. Popkin both introduced the concept of skeptical fideism and served to impressively document its importance in the philosophies of a diverse range of thinkers, including Montaigne, Pascal, Huet, and Bayle. Popkin's landmark *History of Scepticism*, however, begins its coverage with the Renaissance. In this paper I explore the roots of skeptical fideism in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, with special attention to Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, the oldest surviving text to clearly develop a skeptical fideist perspective.

KEYWORDS: Cicero, Academic skepticism, skeptical fideism

The work of Richard H. Popkin both introduced the concept of skeptical fideism and served to impressively document its importance in the philosophies of a diverse range of thinkers, including Montaigne, Pascal, Huet, and Bayle. Popkin added the term "skeptical fideism" to the philosophical lexicon in the first edition of his landmark account of the role of skepticism in the development of early modern philosophy, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Co., 1960).<sup>1</sup> Essentially we have here a compound term, composed of two component terms, each of which is susceptible of a very wide range of meanings. 'Skepticism' is perhaps the easier one to narrow down, since the meaning of this term must, given Popkin's intended use of it, refer to some relatively extreme form of ancient Greek skepticism, and in particular to some Renaissance or early modern revival of Academic or Pyrrhonian skepticism.<sup>2</sup> 'Fideism' is based on the Latin *fides*,

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<sup>1</sup> Popkin's *History of Scepticism* has now gone through three expanding editions, the last of which extends his coverage as far as Pierre Bayle, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Searching for "skeptical fideism" in the *Philosopher's Index* does not return any results earlier than Popkin's paper "The High Road to Pyrrhonism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2 (1965): 18-32. Searches done using the PhilPapers archive and Google also failed to return any pre-Popkin results for "skeptical fideism."

<sup>2</sup> Popkin proposes that, for his project, skepticism is "a philosophical view that raises doubts about the adequacy or reliability of the evidence that could be offered to justify any proposition" (*History of Scepticism*, xiii-xiv).

meaning ‘faith’—hence faith-ism—and ‘faith’ is somewhat harder to pin down in this way. After all, as Popkin argues, Montaigne is a fideist, but Montaigne seems not to be a fideist in the same way that, say, Pascal or Bayle are.<sup>3</sup>

So, we can begin by exploring some possible meanings for this term ‘skeptical fideism’ that emerges in scholarship focusing on Renaissance and early modern philosophy. Having done that, I want to look back and consider the history of this kind of view in the Western tradition. It certainly didn’t spring into existence circa 1500 CE, unprecedented and new. I will be suggesting that the clearest and best articulated ancient version of the position resides in Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum* (*DND*), though we will also consider some earlier and some later texts, from Plato and from Sextus Empiricus respectively, which contain important elements of a ‘skeptical fideist’ view and which no doubt contributed to the overall set of raw materials from which later figures, like Montaigne, could draw inspiration.<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Taxonomizing Varieties of Skeptical Fideism

If we think of a religion as consisting of a (constantly evolving and perhaps never fully determinate) set of doctrines and practices, then a concern for holding the right doctrines (orthodoxy) and a concern for maintaining and engaging in the correct practices (orthopraxy) will seem to naturally follow. Different religions might distribute their concern in different ways, some pressing the importance of orthodoxy, where others might emphasize orthopraxy instead.

Taking this distinction as an initial point of departure, a skeptical fideist might combine some form of extreme skepticism (undercutting any claims to justified belief or knowledge) with the acceptance of certain *religious doctrines*. Alternatively, a skeptical fideist might combine some form of extreme skepticism with continued attachment to certain *religious practices*. Lastly, of course, a skeptical fideist might combine some form of extreme skepticism with acceptance

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<sup>3</sup> See Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, xiv-xvi.

<sup>4</sup> In his *History of Scepticism*, Popkin discusses Cicero as an important source-text for skeptical ideas for early modern thinkers, but Popkin does not consider *DND* as a source-text for skeptical fideism itself. Terence Penelhum, writing a couple decades later, does briefly consider Cicero’s *DND* as such a source. See his *God and Scepticism: A Study in Scepticism and Fideism* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983), 13-14. For an excellent recent paper which considers *DND* in relation to both skepticism and fideism (though not skeptical fideism), see J. P. F. Wynne, “Learned and Wise: Cotta the Sceptic in Cicero’s *On the Nature of the Gods*,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 47 (2014): 245-273. Indeed, anyone interested in *DND* should read Wynne’s paper.



of, and continued attachment to, certain religious doctrines *and* certain religious practices. As in the various religions themselves, a skeptical fideist of the third type (one whose view embraces both religious doctrines and religious practices) might distribute their focus in different ways. If you think of a spectrum, where one end represents undivided concern with orthodoxy (and no concern for orthopraxy at all), and where the opposite end represents undivided concern with orthopraxy (and no concern for orthodoxy at all), then think of dead-middle as representing equal concern for orthodoxy and orthopraxy, where moving in one direction from that middle point prioritizes doctrines more, and where movement in the opposite direction would prioritize practices more. This would seem to cover all possible distributions of focus between doctrines and practices. Toward the purely orthopraxic end of the spectrum, 'faith' is entirely or largely a matter of maintenance of and adherence to existing religious conventions. Toward the purely orthodoxic end, 'faith' is entirely or largely a matter of accepting and believing in the right doctrines. At the middle of the spectrum, 'faith' would mean a rich combination of both beliefs and practices. Note that for any of the views just sketched, what makes the view *fideistic*—rather than simply *religious*—is that fideists hold that their religious doctrines and/or practices cannot be rationally defended.<sup>5</sup> Some fideists even go so far as to propose that their religious commitments may be positively irrational, in the sense of being not merely *unsupported by reason*, but of being *positively opposed* to the deliverances of reason.<sup>6</sup>

Now, considered in these terms, I would place Montaigne relatively close to the orthopraxic end of the spectrum.<sup>7</sup> However, there is no doubt that Montaigne also sometimes expresses himself in ways that straightforwardly suggest some concern for religious beliefs (orthodoxy) as well. On the other hand, thinkers like Pascal and Bayle might be regarded as skeptical fideists of the middle-spectrum or orthodoxy-end type, since their accounts of faith seems less about traditions and more about inner mental states like belief.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, xiv-xv.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* Bayle develops a version of this irrationalist form of fideism. See the article "Pyrrho" (pp. 194-209) along with the "Third Clarification" (pp. 421-435) in Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, trans. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> I have defended this view, though not quite in these terms, in earlier work. See Brian Ribeiro, "Sextus, Montaigne, Hume: Exercises in Skeptical Cartography," *Modern Schoolman* 87 (2009): 7-34.

<sup>8</sup> For example, note how Bayle's discussion puts a heavy focus on doctrines (and hence on

## 2. The Ancient Roots of Skeptical Fideism

In seeking the ancient roots for the tradition of skeptical fideism, we can begin by considering the Socrates of Plato's dialogues. If one were arguing for the view that Plato's Socrates is properly considered a skeptic, the evidence for that view would consist of pointing out his aporetic engagements with interlocutors in the so-called Socratic dialogues. What is friendship (*Lysis*) or piety (*Euthyphro*) or courage (*Laches*)—well, who can say? On the other hand, the evidence for refusing to read the character Socrates as a skeptic would surely include his apparently firm commitment to, and willingness to be put to death on account of, certain moral and spiritual views, concerning never doing wrong (even in return for a wrong received) and Socrates' belief in an immortal soul and the possibility of divine judgment after death and the possibility of reincarnation and rebirth.<sup>9</sup>

But note how these *pro et contra* arguments about Socrates-as-a-skeptic relate to each other: it is exactly this odd or counter-intuitive combination of extreme skeptical doubt and ready acceptance of religious beliefs or practices that characterizes the skeptical fideist. In skeptical fideists, the 'faith' doesn't do away with the 'skepticism': the two are joined or somehow found to harmonize. Second, note that the various moral and spiritual ideas which Socrates accepts seem to be accepted without much in the way of rational defense. They seem more like posits or hypotheses, not like items of knowledge. To that extent, they would be consistent with a quite extreme skepticism. For example, in the *Meno*, after Meno's skeptical dilemma is presented—we can't search for what we know or for what we don't know (80d-e)—Socrates responds by citing the views of some "wise men and women talk[ing] about divine matters" (81a).<sup>10</sup> These people were "priests and priestesses," though Socrates also finds the same view in some poets as well (81a-b).<sup>11</sup> The view

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orthodoxy). See Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, s.v. "Pyrrho" (esp. 199-204). For a clear statement of Pascal's skeptical fideism, see Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1995), 33-36 [= Sellier 164 / Lafuma 131].

<sup>9</sup> Drawing from the *Crito* and the *Meno*. See *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). Even if the *Meno* is a late enough dialogue to be giving us more Plato than Socrates, the *Meno* still informs subsequent audiences' readings of Socrates-the-character-in-Plato's-dialogues. We are considering the question whether Socrates-the-character could be understood as a skeptical fideist in some way(s) or to some extent.

<sup>10</sup> Translations from the *Meno* are from *Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> *Apology* 22b-c suggests that the poets themselves may be subject to divine inspiration in their

in question is the famous theory of recollection, involving immortal souls, reincarnation, etc. Does Socrates come to accept this view on the basis of its being *embraced by religious figures and inspired poets*? Seemingly, yes. Of course, Socrates does offer the questioning of the slave boy as support for this view, but he then concludes by adding that he thinks we will be “better men, braver and less idle, if we believe [this theory]” (86b-c). This suggests that Socrates’ theory comes from religious/poetic sources *and* that it requires some support from pragmatics (we will be braver, less idle if we believe it). I’m not sure if this is skeptical fideism exactly, but certainly some of the raw materials are here. We have the apparent inability to achieve rational insight or knowledge, combined with the attempt to seek inspiration—pun intended—from other sources like religious teachers and poets.

Or consider Socrates’ frequent appeals to his divine sign (*daimonion*) in the *Apology* and elsewhere. Socrates begins his defense speech with the story of Chaerephon’s visit to the oracle of Delphi. Through the telling of this story we are meant to learn that if Socrates is indeed the wisest—as the oracle reports him to be—this is only because he humbly recognizes his own *lack of wisdom* (21a-23c). With this Socratic insight into his own ignorance firmly in place, Socrates begins to defend himself, and explain his behavior, by making appeals to the divine, both in the message of the oracle and in reference to the urgings of his *daimonion*. In other words, it seems that when Socrates reaches the end of his elenctic rope and finds only *aporia*—because true wisdom is merely the recognition of how little human wisdom amounts to (23a)—then he must appeal to divine inspiration and divine assistance. He reports this as a regular occurrence.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, this short account leaves a number of complications unresolved. Certainly, Plato’s character Socrates never self-identifies as a skeptic. And the nature and extent of his skepticism has not been discussed in any careful way here. Even if later skeptics claimed Socratic heritage,<sup>13</sup> those claims must be critically evaluated. Moreover, the various moral and spiritual ideas I drew attention to may not align with any then-practiced religion or religious tradition, though perhaps this should

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productions, explaining their connection to those “priests and priestesses” and their potential role as authorities on divine matters.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, *Apology* 31c-32a and also 40a-c (where the voice is said to be his “constant companion”). Dan Larkin’s contribution to the Vanderbilt Ancient Epistemology workshop (April 2018) provided an especially clear analysis of the fideistic aspects of Plato’s Socrates. Larkin’s reading powerfully illustrates how someone like Montaigne might have understood Socrates.

<sup>13</sup> For example, Cicero, *DND* 1.11.

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not carry too much weight with us. Perhaps one's 'faith' needn't be a communally shared faith. Nonetheless, as I've said, there is something like the skeptical fideist's combination of 'skepticism' and 'faith' in the character of Socrates, with Plato's various dialogues being the first texts to even suggest that unique yet counter-intuitive combination. For a later thinker like Montaigne, for whom Socrates looms so large as the perfect model of the philosopher, one can see how the reading of Socrates-as-skeptical-fideist would be possible and perhaps attractive: the searching doubts, combined with the humble piety, all tied neatly together in the 'oracle of Delphi' story, a humble searcher heeding his divine sign rather than trusting to his own insight.

### 3. Cicero & Skeptical Fideism in *De Natura Deorum*

Cicero's *Academica*, which is entirely devoted to comparing and evaluating several versions of Academic skepticism, does not discuss the general question of what the Academic skeptic's attitude toward religion is or ought to be.<sup>14</sup> However, in *De Natura Deorum* (*On the Nature of the Gods*), the skeptical character Cotta does address this question, both directly and repeatedly.

The puzzle is this: how can Cotta be *both* a pontifex of the Roman state religion<sup>15</sup> and *also* an Academic skeptic, perhaps even a *radical* Academic skeptic, just as Cicero identifies himself to be in the *Academica*?<sup>16</sup> In Book 1 of *DND*, Cicero describes what the "Academics" think, and one would presume that Cicero's

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<sup>14</sup> For a recent translation of the *Academica*, see Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, trans. Charles Brittain (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> The *pontifices* were one of the four major colleges of priests in the ancient Roman state religion. They were the most important of the four orders.

<sup>16</sup> While Cicero narrates the *Academica* and clearly identifies himself with Clitomachus's radical interpretation of Carneades (*Acad.* 2.65-66, 2.78, 2.108, 2.112-113), one might nonetheless have the impression from *other texts* that Cicero was actually a mitigated skeptic (e.g., see the *Tusculan Disputations*). (For Cicero as a mitigated skeptic, see Harald Thorsrud, *Ancient Scepticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 84-101; for Cicero and Cotta as radical skeptics, see Wynne, "Learned and Wise.") As Wynne points out ("Learned and Wise," 256-257), there may be a way to understand these textual tensions through the lens of Cicero's claim that, even as a radical skeptic, his human weakness often leaves him holding opinions (see *Acad.* 2.66). Incidentally, 2.66 from the *Academica* provides an especially clear example of the "aspirationalist" reading of radical skepticism which I defended with respect to Sextan Pyrrhonism in Brian Ribeiro, "Is Pyrrhonism Psychologically Possible?," *Ancient Philosophy* 22 (2002): 319-331. I wish I had been aware of this passage back in 2002, since it would have bolstered my case in some respects.

description would fit the only other Academic (viz., Cotta) involved in this dialogue, the dialogue which Cicero is *preparing the reader to understand*. The Academic skepticism described there in Book 1 of *DND* certainly appears to be of the radical type.<sup>17</sup> If the other Academic, Cotta, held a *different* kind of view (mitigated Academic skepticism) from Cicero himself (radical Academic skepticism), this would have been a natural place for Cicero to inform the reader of that and perhaps indicate the nature of their disagreement. *Yet he does not*.

So, if our puzzle is “how can Cotta be *both* a pontifex of the Roman state religion and *also* an Academic skeptic, perhaps even a *radical* Academic skeptic?,” then I think *solution* to this puzzle, in *DND*, is skeptical fideism. In fact, what I’m calling the solution to this puzzle is not hard to find in *DND*. There are several places in *DND* where Cotta’s priesthood is quite explicitly the topic of discussion. In each case where Cotta responds at any length, he describes his own view in skeptical-fideistic terms. Take the first of these important passages—Cotta speaking:

In this investigation of the nature of the gods, the primary issue is whether they exist or not. You [Velleius] say that it is difficult to deny it. I agree, if the question is posed in public, but it is quite easy in this type of conversation conducted between friends. So though I am a *pontifex* myself, and though I believe that our ritual and state-observances should be most religiously maintained, I should certainly like to be persuaded of the fundamental issue that gods exist, not merely as an expression of opinion but as a statement of truth; for many troubling considerations occur to me which sometimes lead me to think that they do not exist at all (*DND* 1.61 [24]).

Here, although Cotta thinks the “ritual and state-observances should be most religiously maintained,” this is not rooted in his belief that the existence of the gods can be rationally defended. *At the very most* Cotta merely accepts that belief (in a fideistic sense), and it seems possible that he *does not even opine* that the gods exist. A number of passages in *DND* see Cotta admitting that the gods do exist in what appears to be only in a for-the-sake-of-argument sense.<sup>18</sup> Admittedly other passages in *DND* suggest that Cotta does actually believe that the gods exist, though he clearly

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<sup>17</sup> See *DND* 1.1 [3] and 1.11-12 [6-7]. Unless otherwise indicated, all passages quoted from *DND* are from Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, trans. P. G. Walsh (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), and pages number references to that edition are given in square brackets. *DND* is also available in the Loeb Classical Library series: *De Natura Deorum* in *Cicero*, Vol. 19, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951).

<sup>18</sup> For one example, see the paragraph immediately following the one quoted above (*DND* 1.62 [24]).

does not regard that opinion as rationally supported.<sup>19</sup> Whether Cotta actually believes that the gods exist or not, since Cotta thinks that any religious practices or beliefs he does embrace have no rational support, Cotta's view is a version of skeptical fideism—he's an Academic pontifex. His fideism is directly driven by his skepticism.

A richer passage comes later on, right at the beginning of Book 3. In Book 2, Stoic theology is expressed and defended by the character Balbus. Much of the material consists of the arguments of natural theology. Balbus then concludes Book 2 by revisiting the issue of Cotta's priesthood and insisting that Cotta, "as leading citizen and priest," ought to embrace the Stoic arguments just offered. To argue against the existence of the gods, Balbus says, is "a debased and impious practice" (2.168 [107]). This casting down of the gauntlet sets the stage for Cotta's reply, given in Book 3, which the reader is told begins with Cotta smiling (3.1 [108]). Cotta says that at this point he will "say a word about [his] own position" (3.5 [109])—he has so far mostly played the role of critic. Here is what he says:

I take considerably to heart your authority, Balbus, and the comments at the close of your discourse, in which you urged me to remember that I am not just Cotta, but also a priest. The point you were making, I imagine, was that I should defend the beliefs about the immortal gods which we have inherited from our ancestors, together with the sacrifices, ceremonies, and religious observances. I shall indeed defend them, and I have always done so; no words from any person, whether learned or unlearned, will ever budge me from views which I inherited from our ancestors concerning the worship of the immortal gods. (*DND* 3.5 [109])

That Cotta's fideism includes orthopraxy regarding the rituals and observances is clear. In discussing the Book 1 passage before, we saw that there was some question of whether Cotta's 'faith' also includes any actual beliefs, or whether it was limited

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<sup>19</sup> "In fact I do believe that [the gods] do [exist], but the Stoics do not prove it" (*DND* 3.15 [113]). One might argue that passages like this one prove that Cotta is a mitigated skeptic (because Cotta admits to opining); however, Wynne ("Learned and Wise," 256-257) provides a clear way of understanding such statements where they do not prove that at all (cf. *Acad.* 2.66, as discussed in note 16, above). Moreover, it should be borne carefully in mind that Cotta *only* professes to opine about the existence of the gods, a belief he finds "no cautery can dislodge . . . from [his] mind" (3.7 [110]). This *one case of opining*, taken on its own, is hardly impressive evidence for claiming that Cotta is a mitigated and not a radical skeptic, especially given Wynne's discussion. In fact, it seems to me that radical Academic skepticism *in general*, plus firm belief on the existence of the gods *in particular*, reads exactly like skeptical fideism! For further discussion, see Joseph DeFilippo, "Cicero vs. Cotta in *De natura deorum*," *Ancient Philosophy* 20 (2000): 179-181.

to practices alone. In Cotta's reply to Balbus in the passage we are now considering, Cotta raises this belief/practice question again by saying that Balbus would have him "defend the beliefs . . . together with the sacrifices, ceremonies, and religious observances." Cotta's response to Balbus's demand is less than clear. He says he will defend them, and always has, though the tone in no way suggests a rational defense, but more a defense in the sense of refusing to 'budge' (or 'move') from the views he has ancestrally 'inherited' (or 'received'). Moreover, the views Cotta will defend are those "concerning the worship of the immortal gods," rather than views concerning their existence.<sup>20</sup> Later in the same passage Cotta adds that in "any discussion of religion" his "guiding lights" are not Stoic philosophers, like Zeno or Chrysippus, but former Roman religious officials whom he mentions by name (3.5 [109]). This certainly reads like skeptical fideism of the more orthopraxically-focused variety. "So much, Balbus, for the sentiments of Cotta the priest," Cotta says. Cotta says he will lend his assent to what his forebears have taught him "even when no rationale is offered" (3.6 [109]).<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. After Cicero

When we turn our attention to much later thinkers who further develop and explore variations of skeptical fideism, we can see how these later thinkers could find antecedents of their view in ancient Greek and Roman philosophy. We have already considered how the character of Socrates as he is depicted in Plato's dialogues has some of the raw materials in place for that unique combination of an extreme epistemological skepticism and a fideistic acceptance of some religious beliefs and/or practices. However, in my view Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* provides later thinkers, like Montaigne, with the most fully elaborated version of skeptical fideism in ancient Western philosophy. *De Natura Deorum* is both the oldest surviving text in the Western canon to clearly develop a skeptical fideist perspective and the most fully developed version of that position in Greek and Roman philosophy.

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<sup>20</sup> Here's the important end of the passage in another translation: "I myself will indeed defend them always and always have defended them, nor will anybody's speech, <a speech> of a learned man or of an unlearned man, ever move me from that opinion [*me ex ea opinione . . . movebit*], which I have received from my ancestors, about the worship of the immortal gods" (Wynne, "Learned and Wise," 256).

<sup>21</sup> A third passage where the pontifex/skeptical fideism connection is made comes later in Book 3 (*DND* 3.43-44 [122-123]), though the passage is not as instructive as the two considered above.

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Sextus Empiricus, writing a couple centuries after Cicero, does provide his own brand of skeptic—the Pyrrhonian skeptic—with something to say about religion. The passages in Sextus, however, while they might suggest an orthopraxic and traditionalist version of skeptical fideism, also have a tone of pragmatic insincerity to them. Sextus presents more or less the same view in both the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and in *Adversus Mathematicos*:

[F]ollowing ordinary life without opinions, we [Pyrrhonists] say that there are gods and we are pious towards the gods and say that they are provident.<sup>22</sup>

[I]n line with his ancestral customs and laws, [the Pyrrhonist] says that there are gods and does everything that tends to worship of and reverence towards them.<sup>23</sup>

Here we have the marks of orthopraxy—“without opinions” and “in line with his ancestral customs and laws,” the Pyrrhonist performs the appropriate acts of “worship.” But there’s also that note of insincerity or duplicity—the Pyrrhonist “says” that the gods exist, but surely the Sextan Pyrrhonist doesn’t *believe* they do.<sup>24</sup> This is the key point: a genuine skeptical fideist is not simply a skeptic who disingenuously keeps up the practices or professions of some faith. Cotta’s ‘faith’ may have no rational grounding, but it’s not *disingenuous*. The Sextan comments quoted above read more like a recipe for Hume’s later attempt to package (or camouflage) his corrosive critiques of religious beliefs with obviously insincere appeals to faith and the gospel that would fool no discerning reader.<sup>25</sup>

In any case, for a thinker like Montaigne, to whom Plato, Cicero, and Sextus were all well-known and often-quoted sources, there are a variety of materials in

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<sup>22</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, trans. Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143 [= *PH3.2*].

<sup>23</sup> Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Physicists*, trans. Richard Bett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 13 [= *M9.49*].

<sup>24</sup> Cf. the views expressed in Book 2 of Cicero’s *De Divinatione*, where the view articulated is closer to Sextus’ than to Cotta’s. See Cicero, *De Divinatione* in *Cicero*, Vol. 20, trans. W. A. Falconer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), esp. 2.28 and 2.70.

<sup>25</sup> Hume does this in many places. See David Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 164 and 186 (the conclusions of Sections 8 and 10 respectively); *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing), 66, 89, and 97. These various passages speak, in barely concealed dissimulation, of “mysteries” and “faith” and even “the gospel” and “divine revelation.” Not all of these passages are *in propria persona*, but many of them are. The reasons for dissembling on this topic are easy to see, particularly given the time in which Hume lived, so I don’t mean to be saying anything critical of Hume’s character here.



Greek and Roman philosophy for constructing a skeptical fideist perspective. Montaigne's "Apology for Raymond Sebond" (*Essays* II:12) provides the central text for examining his skeptical fideism. One of Montaigne's many expressions of the view, below, echoes familiar ideas from Cotta—remaining *unmoved*, holding onto one's *ancestral traditions*.

As I do not have the capacity for making a choice myself, I accept Another's choice and remain where God put me. Otherwise I would not know how to save myself from endlessly rolling. And thus, by God's grace, without worry or a troubled conscience, I have kept myself whole, within the ancient beliefs of our religion, through all the sects and schisms that our century has produced.<sup>26</sup>

On first reading, Montaigne seems to go well beyond orthopraxy here, with his talk of "God's grace" keeping him "within the ancient beliefs of our religion." In my view, though, these statements of belief are at most statements of a tepid acceptance—think of the 'religious beliefs' of the not-very-religious in our own day and age. But even if I am wrong, and Montaigne's beliefs are genuine and deep, this would simply be his own version of the position, moving in the direction of the orthodoxic end of our spectrum. Pascal and Bayle would both move their versions of skeptical fideism even further in that direction.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have explored the ancient roots of skeptical fideism in the texts of Plato, Sextus, and most especially Cicero. I regard Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* as both the oldest surviving Western text where this view is developed and the text which provided later thinkers with the most fully articulated ancient version of the view. Historical transformations between Cicero's time and Montaigne's made it the case that they were considering very *different* religious 'faiths' when they sought to harmonize their skepticism with their faith. Cicero's Academic pontifex and Montaigne's Catholic Pyrrhonist may, therefore, raise different questions for us. Montaigne, who we have only briefly discussed, certainly seems to broaden the position's possibilities in ways which qualify as original and which tell us something about the changing nature of religion in Western history. Later skeptical fideists like

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<sup>26</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *An Apology for Raymond Sebond*, trans. M. A. Screech (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 149.

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Pascal and Bayle provide further variations of skeptical fideism, which in turn inspired philosophers of religion and theologians down to the present day.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> I would like to thank all of the participants in the Ancient Epistemology Workshop held at Vanderbilt University in April 2018 for their insightful questions and many helpful suggestions. In addition, my very special thanks go to Scott Aikin, Harald Thorsrud, and Dan Larkin for the stimulating conversations I had with each of them.

# MENO'S PARADOX IS AN EPISTEMIC REGRESS PROBLEM

Andrew CLING

ABSTRACT: I give an interpretation according to which Meno's paradox is an epistemic regress problem. The paradox is an argument for skepticism assuming that (1) *acquired knowledge about an object X requires prior knowledge about what X is* and (2) *any knowledge must be acquired*. (1) is a principle about having reasons for knowledge and about the epistemic priority of knowledge about *what X is*. (1) and (2) jointly imply a regress-generating principle which implies that knowledge always requires an infinite sequence of known reasons. Plato's response to the problem is to accept (1) but reject (2): some knowledge is innate. He argues from this to the conclusion that *the soul is immortal*. This argument can be understood as a response to an Eleatic problem about the possibility of *coming into being* that turns on a regress-generating causal principle analogous to the regress-generating principle presupposed by Meno's paradox.

KEYWORDS: Epistemic regress problem, Meno's paradox, reasons, epistemic priority

## Introduction

An epistemic regress problem is about the reasons we must have if our cognitive states are to have an epistemic value such as *being justified* or *being cases of knowledge*. A key component of any regress problem is a *regress-generating principle*. A regress-generating principle says that a thing  $x$  has a property  $\Phi$  only if some thing  $y$  also has  $\Phi$  and stands in a  $\Phi$ -relevant relationship to  $x$ . An epistemic regress-generating principle states that a cognitive state can have a target epistemic value only if it stands in a reason-providing relationship to some cognitive state that also has that value. It is plausible, for example, that we can know a proposition only if we know a proposition that is an epistemic reason to believe it. Because this principle implies that the reason for a case of knowledge must itself be a case of knowledge, the same principle applies to the reason. It follows that any case of knowledge must be the first component of an endless sequence of known reasons. Any such sequence of reasons must either loop back on itself and form a circle or go

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on to infinity. Each of these conditions, however, seems to be incompatible with having knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

I give a rather freewheeling reading of key parts of Plato's *Meno* and argue that Meno's paradox is an epistemic regress problem about the possibility of knowledge. The paradox is based on a regress-generating principle to the effect that in order to have knowledge about something *X*, a person *S* must already have some knowledge about *X*—knowledge of *what X is*—among *S*'s reasons. But since knowledge about *what X is* would itself be knowledge about *X*, it follows that we can have knowledge about *what X is* only if we have prior knowledge about *what X is*. This is impossible. Meno thinks the paradox shows that we cannot know anything. Plato thinks the solution is to recognize that some knowledge is innate. From this result, Plato draws the conclusion that the soul is immortal. I provide a speculative explication of these arguments that, if successful, connects them to enduring problems in epistemology and metaphysics.

### **Inquiry and Human Excellence**

Meno's paradox (80d–e) is a challenge to the possibility of inquiry. If inquiry is the pursuit of knowledge by means of thinking, it is uncontroversial that inquiry is possible. Seeking to know what human excellence is, Socrates and Meno are able to ask and to answer questions about its nature. They are also able to reason about those answers by identifying their implications and by thinking about whether those implications are correct. It is clear and therefore uninteresting that inquiry, understood in this way, is possible. Because Plato devotes a significant portion of the *Meno* to Socrates's response to Meno's paradox, it is likely that he has a more interesting problem in mind. What is at stake in Meno's paradox, I suggest, is not whether inquiry is possible but whether *successful* inquiry is possible. In particular, the problem is about whether it is possible to *acquire* knowledge by means of inquiry. This leads to a problem about whether we can have any knowledge at all if, with Meno, we assume that the only way to have knowledge is to acquire it by means of inquiry. For if knowledge must be acquired by means of inquiry and we cannot acquire knowledge by means of inquiry, then we cannot know anything.

One reason for taking Meno's paradox to be about the possibility of having knowledge is that this gives thematic unity to the dialogue. From the beginning, the

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<sup>1</sup> For an earlier attempt of mine to unpack the logic of epistemic regress problems see Andrew Cling, "The Epistemic Regress Problem," *Philosophical Studies* 140 (2008): 401–42.

*Meno* is about the nature of human excellence: that thing, whatever it is, that makes human lives worthwhile. Why would Plato suddenly switch the topic of the *Meno* from the nature of human excellence to the possibility of inquiry? The answer, I suggest, is that Plato does not change the topic. For Socrates thinks that human excellence is wisdom, a kind of knowledge. If we cannot have knowledge, then we cannot have human excellence. On this interpretation, Meno's paradox is a direct attack on Socrates's belief about what would make life worthwhile. Plato's anti-skeptical epistemology is a key part of his theory of the meaning of life.

Socrates indicates several times that he takes human excellence to be wisdom, knowledge of goodness. He argues that no one knowingly wants what is bad (77b–78a) from which it follows that to know the good is to desire it. So, insofar as our beliefs and desires give us control over how well our lives go, the key to a meaningful life is having knowledge of goodness. Later in the dialogue Socrates argues that since human excellence must be a beneficial state of the soul and the only state of the soul that is beneficial without qualification is wisdom, human excellence must be wisdom (88c–d). He purports to reject this argument for a manifestly bad reason—knowledge is teachable but virtue is not teachable because no one teaches it (89d)—but he surely recognizes that this objection is terrible. So this argument together with his rejection of weakness of will give us reason to think that Socrates accepts the idea that human excellence is knowledge of goodness. This explains why Socrates takes Meno's skepticism about knowledge to be a serious moral threat:

We must, therefore, not believe that debater's argument, for it would make us idle, and fainthearted men like to hear it, whereas my argument makes them energetic and keen on the search. (81d)<sup>2</sup>

I do not insist that my argument is right in all other respects, but I would contend at all costs both in word and deed as far as I could that we will be better men, braver and less idle, if we believe that one must search for the things one does not know, rather than if we believe that it is not possible to find out what we do not know and that we must not look for it. (86b)

## Meno's Paradox

Meno poses his paradox with three rhetorical questions:

*Meno*: But [M1] how will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations from Plato are from Plato, *Plato's Meno* and are cited in the text by their Stephanus numbers.

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what it is? [M2] How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all?

[M3] If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know? (80d)

I take *inquiry* to be any more-or-less orderly way of thinking with the goal of acquiring knowledge about something. Knowledge about an object X would be a cognitive state that includes an accurate way of thinking about X and that is held in the proper way. (Saying just what it is to be in a cognitive state *properly* is one of the central problems of epistemology.) Because Plato thinks that *objects*—especially unchanging forms or universals—and not just *propositions*, can be objects of knowledge, we need a way to describe cases of knowledge that includes both beliefs and non-propositional cognitive states as potential cases of knowledge. To capture both kinds of knowledge, I shall take a case of knowledge to be a cognitive state that has both an *object* to which the knower is related and a way of thinking about that object, a *content*. To have *propositional knowledge* about an object X one must be related to X by believing a true proposition about X. To have *non-propositional knowledge* about X one must think about X by means of a content that is not propositional. To *acquire knowledge* is to go from a state in which one does not have an item of knowledge to a state in which one does have that knowledge. Meno's paradox is a problem about whether there can be a way of thinking by means of which we are able go from a state in which we do not have an item of knowledge to a state in which we do have that knowledge. It is also about what follows from this for the possibility that we have any knowledge at all.

Meno's first question [M1] is about the possibility of coming to know what human excellence is. Rhetorical questions are disguised statements and [M1] expresses the proposition that *in order to acquire knowledge about human excellence by means of inquiry a person must first know what human excellence is*. Question [M2] generalizes this claim by expressing the proposition that *in order to acquire knowledge about anything by means of inquiry a person must first know what it is*. These propositions echo Socrates's earlier claim that in order to know the qualities of a thing one must know what it is (71b).<sup>3</sup> Each of these claims is about

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<sup>3</sup> This does not, strictly, imply that knowing *what something is* must be *epistemically prior* to knowing its qualities, but, given the paradox, I think this is what Plato has in mind. For Meno's paradox is about the conditions we must satisfy before we can acquire knowledge, that is, come to have knowledge we do not have to begin with. Put another way, the problem is about the resources one must have in the state of not having the target knowledge in order to come to have that knowledge, not just what the logical consequences of having knowledge are.

*priority* because the problem is about how to *acquire* knowledge. The idea here is that in order to acquire knowledge about a thing a person must *first* have a special kind of knowledge about it: knowledge of *what it is*.<sup>4</sup> On this interpretation, [M1] and [M2] are not obvious. Without a plausible reason to believe them, they do not constitute a paradox.

[M3] is Meno's reason for [M1] and [M2]. What does it mean? One possibility is that it is the claim that *no one can acquire any knowledge by means of inquiry*. This, however, would make Meno's argument question-begging, not a paradox. A better possibility is that [M3] expresses the proposition that *to have knowledge a person must have knowledge*. As it stands, however, this is a much-too-plausible trivial truth. No skeptical conclusion follows from that. We need a way to strengthen [M2] so that it is a plausible, substantive claim that is a reason for [M1] and [M2].

There are two keys to [M3]. The first key is that it is about reasons. This is implicit in Meno's idea that it is possible to 'meet with' an object of inquiry and still not know it. This is possible, even in otherwise ideal conditions, if a person lacks a standard by means of which to identify accurate ways of thinking about the object of inquiry. To acquire propositional knowledge about an object X, we need a standard by which to identify true propositions about X. In this case, the standard we need is a factor that counts in favor of *believing* those propositions because it implies or indicates that they are true. To acquire non-propositional knowledge about X, we need a standard by means of which to identify accurate non-propositional ways of thinking about X. In this case, the standard we need is a factor that counts in favor of thinking about X in the relevant non-propositional ways because it indicates that those non-propositional ways of thinking about X are accurate. For both propositional and non-propositional knowledge we need a standard that counts in favor of thinking about X in a particular way because it implies or indicates that the *content* of that way of thinking about X is accurate. Without a standard for identifying accurate ways of thinking about X, we can 'meet with' a thing or a proposition—either directly or by thinking about it—but fail to think about it in a way that amounts to knowing it. A factor that counts in favor of thinking about X in a specified way is a *reason* for thinking about X in that way. Meno's paradox is about the kinds of reasons that we need in order to acquire knowledge.

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<sup>4</sup> Gail Fine, *The Possibility of Inquiry: Meno's Paradox from Socrates to Sextus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 31–34.

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The second key to [M3] is that it is about *epistemic priority*. Meno's paradox is about the conditions that one must satisfy in order to acquire an item of knowledge. Since acquiring an item of knowledge is going from a state in which one lacks that knowledge to a state in which one has that knowledge, it is about what we must know *before* we have the target knowledge. Although this priority has implications for the way in which inquiry must be organized in time, it is essentially *epistemic*, not temporal, priority.

Epistemic priority is about the relationships between a person's reasons and the cognitive states for which they are reasons. To define the concept of epistemic priority, we need a notion of the *reason ancestry* of a cognitive state. Letting capital letters with the form ' $C_n$ ' refer to cognitive states by means of their propositional or non-propositional contents, we may specify the reason ancestry of a cognitive state  $C_1$  recursively, as follows:

(RA1) If  $C_2$  is a reason for  $C_1$  for S, then  $C_2$  is in the reason ancestry of  $C_1$  for S.

(RA2) If  $C_3$  is in the reason ancestry of  $C_2$  for S and  $C_2$  is in the reason ancestry of  $C_1$  for S, then  $C_3$  is in the reason ancestry of  $C_1$  for S.

(RA3) Nothing is in the reason ancestry of  $C_1$  for S except in virtue of (RA1) and (RA2).

According to this account, the reason ancestry of a cognitive state includes all of the reasons that a person has for being in that state, the reasons for those reasons, and so on.

We can now define epistemic priority in terms of the reason ancestry of a cognitive state. A cognitive state  $C_n$  is *epistemically prior* to cognitive state  $C_1$  for a person S just in case  $C_n$  is in the reason ancestry of  $C_1$  for S but  $C_1$  is not in the reason ancestry of  $C_n$  for S. The central idea in Meno's paradox is that a cognitive state with a special content—*what X is*—is epistemically prior to any cognitive state that is a case of knowledge about X. So, according to Meno's paradox, a cognitive state that is a case of knowing *what X is* must be in the reason ancestry of any case of knowledge about X but not vice versa.

### The Problem

We are now in a position to explicate Meno's paradox. It is this argument for skepticism: (1) In order to acquire knowledge about X a person must first know what X is, (2) all knowledge is acquired knowledge, and (3) persons cannot acquire knowledge about X if that requires an infinite regress of reasons, therefore (4) no one



## Meno's Paradox is an Epistemic Regress Problem

can have any knowledge about any object X. (1) and (2) jointly imply that knowledge requires an infinite regress of reasons. Together with (3), this implies that no one can have any knowledge. Let me explain.

I explicate Meno's argument as follows:

- 1) For all persons S, objects X, and cognitive states  $C_1$ ,  $C_1$  is a case of acquired knowledge about X for S only if there is a  $C_2$  such that (i)  $C_2$  is a case of knowledge about X for S, (ii)  $C_2$  is in the reason ancestry of  $C_1$  for S, (iii)  $C_2$  is a case of knowledge about *what X is*, and (iv)  $C_1$  is not in the reason ancestry of  $C_2$  for S.
- 2) For all persons S, objects X, and cognitive states  $C_1$ ,  $C_1$  is a case of knowledge about X for S only if  $C_1$  is a case of acquired knowledge about X for S.
- 3) For all persons S, objects X, and cognitive states  $C_1$ ,  $C_1$  is not a case of knowledge about X if that requires that there are infinitely many cases of knowledge about *what X is* in the reason ancestry of  $C_1$ .
- 4)  $\therefore$  For all persons S, objects X, and cognitive states  $C_1$ ,  $C_1$  is not a case of knowledge about X for S.

(1) and (2) jointly imply this regress-generating principle:

(RGM) For all persons S, objects X, and cognitive states  $C_1$ ,  $C_1$  is a case of knowledge about X for S only if there is a  $C_2$  such that (i)  $C_2$  is a case of knowledge about X for S, (ii)  $C_2$  is in the reason ancestry of  $C_1$  for S, (iii)  $C_2$  is a case of knowledge about *what X is*, and (iv)  $C_1$  is not in the reason ancestry of  $C_2$  for S.

Clause (i) is a recursion condition essential to generating a regress. Clause (ii) expresses the reason-providing relationship that is essential to generating an epistemic regress in this case. Clauses (iii) and (iv) are the special conditions on knowledge implicit in Meno's principle [M3]. Clause (iii) is a special condition on the reasons that are required for knowledge: knowledge about *what X is* must be among our reasons if we are to have any knowledge about X. Clause (iv) is the *epistemic priority condition* about the relationships between the reasons we have for a case of knowledge, on the one hand, and that knowledge on the other.

(RGM) implies that any case of knowledge must be the first component of an infinite regress of reasons that are cases of knowledge. For suppose that a cognitive state  $C_1$  is a case of knowledge about X for a person S. Given this, (RGM) implies—by (i), (ii), and (iii)—that there is a cognitive state  $C_2$  that is a case of knowledge about *what X is* in the reason ancestry of  $C_1$  for S. Since, however, knowing *what X is* is itself a case of knowledge about X, (RGM) implies—by (iii) and (iv)—that there

is an epistemically prior case of knowledge about *what X is*,  $C_3$ , in the reason ancestry of  $C_2$  for S, and so on. To see what this implies about the possibility of knowledge, we must consider three possibilities: (a) there is only one cognitive state that is a case of knowledge about *what X is*, (b) there are more than one but finitely many cognitive states that are cases of knowledge about *what X is*, and (c) there are infinitely many cognitive states that are cases of knowledge about *what X is*. In cases (a) and (b), (RGM) implies skepticism all by itself. (RGM) does not imply skepticism in case (c), so the no-infinite-regress principle (NR) is required for the argument to imply skepticism.

Suppose, as Plato seems to, that there is only one cognitive state that is a case of knowledge about *what X is*. This assumption together with (RGM) implies that knowledge is impossible. Let  $C_1$  be a potential case of knowledge about X and let  $C_2$  be the one cognitive state that is knowledge about *what X is*. (RGM) implies that  $C_1$  must have  $C_2$  in its reason ancestry. Because  $C_2$  is itself a case of knowledge about X and  $C_2$  is the only cognitive state that is a case of knowledge about *what X is*, (RGM) implies that  $C_2$  must be in its own reason ancestry. (RGM) also implies, however, that this is impossible for it implies—via (iv)—that  $C_2$  cannot be in its own reason ancestry. So if there is only one way to have knowledge about *what X is* and (RGM) is true, then knowledge is impossible.

Suppose that there are more than one but only finitely many distinct cognitive states that are the cases of knowledge about *what X is*. This assumption together with (RGM) also implies that knowledge is impossible. Let  $C_1$  be a potential case of knowledge about X and let  $C_2 \dots C_n$  be the cognitive states that are cases of knowledge about *what X is*. Under these conditions (RGM) implies that some case of knowledge about *what X is* must be in its own reason ancestry. Since  $C_1$  must have a case of knowledge about *what X is* in its reason ancestry and every case of knowledge about *what X is* is itself a case of knowledge about X, (RGM) implies that every case of knowledge about *what X is* requires that there be an epistemically prior, hence distinct, case of knowing *what X is* in its reason ancestry. Sooner or later there will be no new cases of knowledge about *what X is* to add to the reason ancestry of  $C_1$ . So either the final case of knowledge about *what X is* in the reason ancestry of  $C_1$ — $C_n$ —has no case of knowledge about *what X is* in its own reason ancestry—in which case (RGM) implies that it is not a case of knowledge—or  $C_n$  has some case of knowledge about *what X is* in its ancestry. Since, by hypotheses, all of the cases of knowledge about *what X is* have appeared earlier in the reason ancestry of  $C_1$ , this case of knowing *what X is* must have appeared earlier in the sequence and,

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therefore, will be in its own reason ancestry. (RGM), however, implies that this is incompatible with having knowledge. So if there are more than one but finitely many cognitive states that are cases of knowledge about *what X is*, (RGM) implies that knowledge is impossible.

Suppose, finally, that there are infinitely many distinct cognitive states that are cases of knowledge about *what X is*. This assumption together with (RGM) does not imply that knowledge about X is impossible. For suppose that a cognitive state  $C_1$  is a case of knowledge about X. (RGM) implies that there is a cognitive state  $C_2$  that is a case of knowledge about *what X is* that is in the reason ancestry of  $C_1$ . Since  $C_2$  is itself a case of knowledge about X, (RGM) implies that there is a distinct cognitive state  $C_3$  that is a case of knowledge about *what X is* that is in the cognitive ancestry of  $C_2$ , and so on. Since, by hypothesis, there are infinitely many cognitive states that are ways of knowing *what X is*, we need never run out of cases of knowledge about *what X is* to be in the reason ancestry of  $C_1$ . So (RGM) does not imply that knowledge is impossible if there are infinitely many cognitive states that are cases of knowledge about *what X is*. This is why Meno's paradox requires the injunction against infinite regresses expressed by (3).

### **Platonic Rationalism and What X Is**

Plato's response to Meno's paradox is to avoid commitment to the regress-generating principle (RGM) by rejecting (2). In his view, not all knowledge is acquired by means of inquiry, some is innate. Plato, however, accepts (1): in order to acquire knowledge about X one must first know *what X is*. This explains why Socrates restates Meno's paradox:

Socrates: I know what you want to say, Meno. Do you realize what a debater's argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for. (80e)

Socrates restates the problem because he agrees with Meno that because (1) is true, if all knowledge is acquired, then we cannot have any knowledge. Since any acquired knowledge about X requires prior knowledge about *what X is* and knowledge about *what X is* is knowledge about X, the only way to acquire knowledge about X—assuming that there are at most finitely many ways to have knowledge about *what X is*—is to have innate knowledge about *what X is*. Socrates's interrogation of Meno's slave boy about the problem of doubling the square (82b–

86c) is designed to provide independent support for this rationalism. For, as we may put it in light of my explication of Meno's paradox, the knowledge the boy acquires as a result of this interrogation requires an epistemically prior, innate standard for distinguishing between accurate and inaccurate ways of thinking about squares.

Socrates can avoid being committed to the implausible view that all knowledge is innate on this interpretation. That all knowledge is innate is suggested in some places in the dialogue but Socrates does not need it. One place this view is suggested is at the end of Socrates's restatement of the paradox at 80d itself. For one way to read the final clause quoted just above is as the claim that unless *S* already has a given item of knowledge *G*<sub>1</sub>, *S* cannot be in a position to recognize that the content of *G*<sub>1</sub> itself is accurate. It follows from this that all of the knowledge we have must be innate because we can identify accurate ways of thinking only by means of themselves. Another way to read the passage, however, is to take it as the claim that *G*<sub>1</sub> cannot be a case of acquired knowledge about *X* that we do not already have unless we first know *what X is*—have a standard for deciding that the content of *G*<sub>1</sub> is accurate—and we cannot know *what X is* if all knowledge must be acquired. This sort of reading is further supported by Socrates's later claims that seem to commit him to the idea that it is important to seek to acquire knowledge (81d) and that it is important to believe that we can “find out what we do not know” (86c). It is also supported by this suggestive, dark poetic passage:

As the whole of nature is akin, and the soul has learned everything, nothing prevents a man, after recalling one thing only—a process men call learning—discovering everything else for himself, if he is brave and does not tire of the search, for searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection. (81d)

This passage suggests that we are in a position to acquire knowledge if we have at least some—“one thing only”—knowledge that is innate. Plato seems to hold the view that our innate grasp of the unchanging forms provides us with knowledge about *what X is* for each type of thing and that this puts us in a position to acquire other knowledge about things of those types. Whether or not this interpretation can make sense of every relevant passage, it is evident that because the view that *some knowledge is innate* is weaker claim than the claim that *all knowledge is innate*, it is a more plausible version of epistemological rationalism.

I have not given an account of Plato's view about the content of any knowledge about *what X is*. One might think, for example, that the content of this knowledge must be the same as the content of a correct answer to a Socratic

interrogation about X.<sup>5</sup> On this view, for example, the content of knowledge about *what human excellence is* must be the same thing as the content of a correct answer to Socrates's question to Meno, "what is human excellence?" If that answer must imply all of the necessary conditions on human excellence, it will be hard to have knowledge about what human excellence is and, therefore, harder still to know anything else about it. The same thing goes for any object about which we might seek to acquire knowledge: if any knowledge about X requires prior knowledge of the necessary and sufficient conditions for being X, it will hard to have any knowledge at all, whether or not Meno's paradox about acquiring knowledge can be solved. But Meno does not need this sort of view about the content of *what X is* for his paradox to arise. For, as I have argued, the paradox requires only that knowledge about *what X is* be a standard by which to identify accurate ways of thinking about X. Whatever the specific details about the content of knowledge about *what X is*, it is plausible to think that knowledge about anything X requires knowledge of an epistemically prior standard for identifying accurate ways of thinking about X. This is enough to make Meno's paradox a serious challenge to the possibility of knowledge.

### **Meno's Paradox, an Eleatic Principle, and Immortality**

Plato argues from his claim that we have some innate knowledge to the conclusion that the soul is immortal. In this section, I offer an interpretation of that argument in light of my interpretation of Meno's paradox and a related principle that seems to be implicit in some Eleatic arguments about the possibility of *coming into being*.

Meno's paradox is a special case of an Eleatic problem about *coming to be*.<sup>6</sup> In particular, it is a problem about how properties can come into being. According to a causal principle that seems to be presupposed in much ancient thinking, a thing can have a property  $\Phi$  only if something else has  $\Phi$  and causes  $\Phi$  to be in the target object.<sup>7</sup> For a property to come into being, there must be a prior time at which it

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<sup>5</sup> See Fine, *The Possibility of Inquiry*, 31–45.

<sup>6</sup> Taking Meno's paradox to be analogous to an Eleatic problem was suggested to me by Michael McShane (unpublished lecture). In McShane's view, Meno's three questions are directly analogous to one of Zeno's paradoxes of motion: [1] motion cannot begin, [2] motion cannot continue, [3] motion cannot come to an end. In my view, by contrast, the problem is about what is required for a property to come into being.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the role of this principle in the Presocratics and Plato, see Henry Teloh, *The Development of Plato's Metaphysics* (State College, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press,

does not exist. Given this and the causal principle it follows that a property  $\Phi$  can come into being only if there is a time at which  $\Phi$  does not already exist and does already exist, an impossibility. Letting ' $x$ ' and ' $y$ ' range over objects and ' $\Phi$ ' over properties, we may state the relevant *causal principle* this way:

(CP) For all  $x$  and  $\Phi$ ,  $x$  has  $\Phi$  only if there is a  $y$  such that (i)  $y$  has  $\Phi$ , (ii)  $y$  causes  $\Phi$  to be in  $x$ , and (iii)  $x$  is not in the causal ancestry of  $y$ .

It is evident that (CP) is a regress-generating principle similar to (RGM). Like (RGM), (CP) contains an ancestry condition. In (CP) the ancestry condition is that no object that has a property can be in its own causal ancestry. This condition guarantees that (CP) can be satisfied only if there is a distinct object having  $\Phi$  in the causal ancestry of any object that has  $\Phi$ . It also explains the argument for the conclusion that no property can come into being. The claim that a property comes into being implies that there is a prior time at which it does not exist. (CP), however, implies that there is no prior time at which a property does not exist. Meno's paradox applies an analogous principle to knowledge. Since all knowledge requires some prior knowledge, it is not possible for the property of *being a case of knowledge* to come into being.

This provides us with the conceptual materials we need to make sense of a provocative Platonic argument from the existence of innate knowledge to the immortality of the soul:

Socrates: If then, during the time he exists and is not a human being he will have true opinions which, when stirred by questioning, become knowledge, will not his soul have learned during all time? For it is clear that during all time he exists, either as a man or not. —So it seems.

Socrates: Then if the truth about reality is always in our soul, the soul would be immortal so that you should always confidently try to seek out and recollect what you do not know at present—that is, what you do not recollect. (86a–b)

Taken literally, the first part of this passage is inconsistent with the view that all knowledge is innate. For since innate knowledge is knowledge that is not learned—acquired by means of inquiry—it is not possible to learn innate knowledge in this life or in a previous life. What might happen, however, is that we are able to learn both in this life and in previous lives, if we have some innate knowledge by which to identify accurate ways of thinking about things.

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1981), 42–46.

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The argument for immortality is given in Socrates's second speech above (86b): *we have some innate knowledge* therefore *the soul is immortal*. This argument makes sense given my interpretation of Meno's paradox and the causal principle (CP). Plato thinks that Meno's paradox shows that because we have knowledge, not all knowledge is acquired, that is, some knowledge does not *come into being*. Since knowledge is a cognitive state—a state of the soul, as Plato would have it—it follows that the soul does not come into being and, therefore, is immortal. I suggest that we explicate this argument more fully as follows:

- (E1) We have innate knowledge. [Established by Meno's paradox (80d–e) and the interrogation of Meno's slave (82b–86c).]
- (E2) Knowledge is a state of the soul. [Presupposed at 88c.]
- (E3) Innate knowledge cannot come into being by means of inquiry. [Follows from the nature of inquiry.]
- (E4) The only way in which any kind of knowledge can come into being is by means of inquiry. [Assumption.]
- (E5) ∴ The soul cannot come into being. [from (E1)–(E4).]
- (E6) What cannot come into being cannot go out of being. [Assumption.]
- (E7) ∴ The soul is immortal (=the soul cannot come into or go out of being). [from (E5) and (E6).]

Although I am not prepared to defend this argument—my suspicion is that even the friends of innate knowledge will have doubts about (E4)—any mistakes it makes can be uncovered only by means of careful philosophical thinking about important questions in metaphysics and epistemology that are still with us.

### Conclusion

Meno's paradox is an epistemic regress problem. Its key premise is a principle to the effect that we can acquire knowledge by means of inquiry only if we have an epistemically prior reason by means of which to distinguish accurate from inaccurate ways of thinking about the object of knowledge. Together with the assumption that all knowledge must be acquired, this implies the regress-generating principle according to which all knowledge about any object X requires epistemically prior knowledge about *what X is*. The paradox is a special case of a general problem about *coming into being*. Because of this, Plato is able to use his belief in the reality of innate knowledge as a reason for thinking that the soul is immortal. The

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epistemological and metaphysical problems raised by these arguments remain serious and are not mere matters of antiquarian curiosity.<sup>8</sup>

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