

## PYRRHONIAN SCEPTICISM AND *EPOCHĒ*\*

### I. What is *epochē* :

The Pyrrhonian sceptical position, as depicted by Sextus Empiricus, is mainly directed against the philosophers who asserted the possibility or impossibility of knowledge. The philosophers who affirmed the possibility of knowledge ( Plato, Aristotle, Stoics and Epicureans ), labelled by Sextus as ' Dogmatists ', chiefly patronized the view that we can have certain knowledge of the ' non-evident ' objects ( i.e., things as they really are ). Pyrrhonism is also distinct from the ' Academic philosophy ' of men like Carneades and Cleitomachus who dogmatically asserted the impossibility of knowledge. To assert anything dogmatically is to cease to be a sceptic. Carneades was first and foremost a critic especially of the Stoic theory of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> While Carneades maintained the impossibility of certain knowledge and stressed the need for suspension of judgment ( the Greek term is *epochē* ), he seemed to have worked out a more comprehensive theory of probability or ' persuasiveness ' as a guide to thought as well as action.

The Pyrrhonian sceptic, on the other hand, suspends judgment on both the questions regarding the possibility or impossibility of knowledge. He refuses to recognise any belief as being more probable than any other. The sceptic, as against both his rivals, takes arguments both for and against ' non-evident ' things as equally probable or improbable, no one being more or less worthy of assent than another. Sextus writes, " Those who believe they have discovered it ( the truth ) are the ' Dogmatists ', specially so called—Aristotle for example, and Epicurus and the Stoics and certain others; Cleitomachus and Carneades and other Academics treat it ( the truth ) as inapprehensible : the sceptics keep on searching " ( Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, English translation by R. G. Bury, The Loeb Classical Library, Sext. Emp. Vol. 1, p. 3, Heinemann, London, 1933 ). By *judgment* the sceptic generally means the mental act of asserting ( affirming or denying ) an assertible content. The development of the sceptic's argument, according to Sextus, proceeds in a fashion,

quite different from that of the dogmatic philosophers. To arrive at a basic understanding of what *epochē* or suspension of judgment is, let us begin with the following quotation from *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*: "Scepticism is an ability or mental attitude, which opposes appearances to judgments in any way whatsoever, with the result that owing to the equipollence of the objects and reasons thus opposed, we are brought first to a state of mental suspense and next to a state of 'unperturbedness' or quietude. . . . Suspense is a state of mental act owing to which we neither deny nor affirm anything" (*Ibid.*, pp. 7-9).

The first point that is to be noted about *epochē* or suspense of judgment is that the sceptic does not simply stubbornly refuse to affirm or deny anything. They try to justify *epochē*, not only in general, but in regard to each particular proposition. That is to say, to each such proposition the sceptic opposes an equally strong counter-proposition. This is done in one of the following three ways: (a) by opposing arguments in favour of a proposition to arguments against it (as in the discussion of God), (b) or by opposing appearances to arguments (the apparent reality of motion opposed to Zenonian arguments against its reality), (c) or by opposing appearances to appearances (the oar appears bent in the water, appears straight out of water), (*Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 71). The main contention is that, for any such problem whatsoever, no rational basis can be given. The sceptic finds that to any pro-argument for a doctrine or proposition there can be found at least an equally strong contra-argument and when such possible arguments conflict, there seems to be no rational basis for preferring either of them as being more probable than the other. The affirmation and denial will thus be 'equipollent', meaning that "no one of the conflicting judgments takes precedence as being more probable" (*Ibid.*, p. 9). Here the sceptic finds himself involved in a contradiction of equal weights and being unable to decide between the alternatives, prescribes suspension of judgment. Of contradictory propositions one is not more valid than the other. According to the sceptic we should on this account express nothing, but should withhold our judgment. In favour of such suspension the sceptic argues that, this is the only way through which we can stop dogmatizing and avoid the state of being worried and frustrated, thereby achieving mental peace or quietude (the Greek term is *ataraxia*). But the claim

is that judgment is suspended not because it leads to mental equanimity, but because there is nothing to choose between one proposition and its denial. That is to say such a state of suspension of judgment is attained on logical grounds. The sceptic has no predisposition in favour of any of the conflicting propositions. It just so happens that they fail to find sufficient evidence in favour of any of them so that they can retain one and reject the other. Arne Naess in his book *Scepticism* argues in a similar way : " The corresponding psychological phase is the gradual development of a deeply entrenched bent of mind, a state of suspension of judgment, or *epochē* (p. 5). When the mind is thus perfectly balanced so that we neither deny nor affirm anything, tranquility or quietude follows inevitably "as the shadow follows the body". The sceptic thus abstains from passing judgment to keep himself secure against a disturbed condition of mind resulting from mistaken views. The moral worth of the abstinence of judgment consists in the fact that it works as an antidote to frustration and produces equanimity.

## II. Limits of *epochē* :

Although Sextus claims that due to the *epochē*, " we neither deny nor affirm anything", in other passages he qualifies the 'anything'. Judgment, according to Sextus, is not suspended on all propositions, but only on those propositions concerning " the non-evident objects of scientific enquiry ". *Epochē* clearly has limits, but specification of these limits presents a difficult task. Sextus often claims that the sceptic suspends judgment only about the 'non-evident' (the Greek term is *adelos*). He does not overthrow the appearances (the Greek term is *phainomena*). Sextus illustrates the difference in the following way : " . . . honey appears to us to be sweet . . . but whether it is also sweet in its essence is for us a matter of doubt, since this is not an appearance but a judgment regarding the appearance " (Op. cit. Vol. 1, p. 15).

Thus it would seem that the appearances are not subject to doubt, but judgments about appearances; these judgments being not reports of what appears but metaphysical judgments as to what lies behind the appearances. Sextus acknowledges the importance of what may be called 'appearances' and he allows the possibility of uttering expressions with regard to the appearances

in appropriate situations. One can recognise or have opinions about what appears to be the case, without giving up one's attitude of suspense as to what really is the case. Although the sceptic doubts each and every proposition which refers beyond the appearances, it is not possible, according to Sextus, to be sceptical about the appearances themselves. Sextus writes, "Those who say that 'the sceptics abolish appearances', seem to me to be unacquainted with the statements of our school....we do not overthrow the affective sense-impressions which induce our assent<sup>2</sup> involuntarily: and these impressions are the 'appearances'.

In the pair of examples given by Sextus, (a) 'Honey is sweet', and (b) 'Honey appears to be sweet', the first example makes a claim about a perceptual object whereas the second merely reports one's immediate experience. The sceptic rejects (a) because it tries to assert something about the nature of the thing. But the reports of sense-experience cannot be relied upon to give a true account of anything which lies beyond it (i.e., non-evident thing).

What is the nature of these appearances, which have been freed from the scope of *epochē*? The sceptical standpoint regarding these appearances seems to suggest an identification of appearances with sense-impressions (in modern terminology 'sense-data'). But such an identification seems to raise certain difficulties. Sextus' writings are in great part devoted to marshalling the 'equipollent' evidence on each side of two conflicting propositions and thus include judgments that the evidence in each case is 'equipollent'. But 'equipollent' roughly means 'of equal probability'. Thus judgments of probability are also reports of appearances. But probability is hardly a sense-impression. The identification of appearances with sense-impressions would not work if Sextus' own views are to remain free from the *epochē*. Further, Sextus will not allow any sort of commitment with regard to the existence of anything 'given' which affect the senses and appear in a certain way to the observer. When the sceptic says, "Honey appears sweet", what he speaks about is not that there is a sense-impression of sweetness, as opposed to an object causing or conditioning the sense-impression.

The sense-impressions cannot also be identified with the subjective states of the observer. The sceptic concedes the fact

that the sense-impressions cause certain affections in the mind of the observer, but the sense-impressions are not themselves these affections but appear to be different from these affections. And if the sceptic is asked to state the nature of a sense-impression (i.e., whether it is subjective or objective in the ultimate sense), he suspends judgment. So the appearances cannot be said to be subjective in the same sense in which the affections are said to be subjective.<sup>3</sup>

The sceptic, according to Sextus, will simply acquiesce in what appears to him in a non-cognitive way, i.e., with no commitment as to whether the appearances are something 'given' or are certain mental states of the observer. Although the sceptic assents to the way things are said to appear, he does not approve the possibility of knowledge about the things as they really are, i.e., 'non-evident things'. Aristotle maintained that in knowing, the soul receives the form of the object and that actual knowledge is identical with its object. According to the sceptic, we are able to receive merely the appearances and nothing beyond them. Our assent to these appearances is due to the fact that in accordance with them we lead the everyday life. The statements about appearances are simply descriptive of present experiences which stimulate and guide actions and make the day-to-day life possible. When the sceptic asserts that honey appears sweet to him, he just assents to the way the honey is said to appear and act accordingly in a non-committal way, i.e., avoiding commitment as to whether honey really is sweet. To the sceptic, Sextus writes, "... belief is a matter of simple yielding without any consent" (*Ibid*, p. 143).

### III. Motive behind the *epochē* :

Sextus provides us with a clear explanation for the view that assent is granted only to phenomena (appearances). We cannot but accept the fact that honey tastes sweet or that we feel warm or cold at some particular times. In these cases, Sextus holds, assent is compelled by our own nature—by the fact that "we are naturally capable of sensation and thought" (*Ibid*, 1.17). Nevertheless to affirm further that honey really is sweet is to make an inference from the undisputed appearances to something non-evident beyond them. The fact that we are continually affected in a certain way, though in itself undeniable, does not necessitate any conclusion about anything which produces these impressions.

All perceptual statements (i.e., statements about non-evident objects), as they refer beyond appearances have been excluded from the class of being true or false. When a statement confines the information it conveys to appearances only, it might seem possible to regard it as true or false. But Sextus declares unequivocally that "nothing is true". Further, these appearances are found to vary from person to person at the same time and to the same person at different times. All the conditions set forth in the ten *Tropes*<sup>4</sup> of Aenesidemus which are acknowledged by Sextus point out that impressions received are always affected by different conditions. Since in each and every case of experience, the character of what is said to appear is affected, there is no satisfactory way to differentiate veridical experience from a non-veridical one. Although Sextus accepts the ten *Tropes*, he attacks Aenesidemus for his doctrine that the appearance about which there is general agreement is true. The fact of general consent with regard to any appearance, according to Sextus, has nothing to do with the fact of their being true or false.

Sextus disputes the possibility of any criterion by which we can differentiate the veridical from non-veridical experiences. It would be somewhat misleading to suppose that Sextus asserts the impossibility of any criterion. What he does is to suspend judgment on the question. Sextus writes, "... since the criterion of truth has happened to be unattainable, it is no longer possible to make positive assertions either about those things which seem to be evident or about those which are non-evident" (*Ibid*, p. 213).

Nevertheless, the apparent rejection of statements about appearances from the class of the true (or false) seems to be a little paradoxical. Sextus seems to hold contradictory views in regard to the truth of the statements about appearances. On the one hand, he holds that these are incontestably true, to which our assent is compelled by our very nature. On the other, he seems to contend that nothing can be known to be true and that we ought to suspend judgment on everything, i.e. both evident and non-evident objects. This dilemma can be resolved by holding that it is based on an equivocation on the meaning of 'true'. In the first case, 'true' is employed in its relative sense, whereby it means something like, 'in conformity with the way things appear'. In

the second case, 'true' is to be taken in its 'absolute' or 'ultimate' sense, whereby it may be taken to imply something like, 'in conformity with the things as they really are'.

That Sextus does not grant the truth (or falsity) of statements of appearances suggests an assumption on his part that the concept of truth can be appropriately employed only in connection with the statements regarding things as they really are. That is to say, a statement to be characterized as true or false, must make a claim about some existing object (fact) in the world—must claim, for example, that something exists or has a certain character; we can thus determine whether it is true by reference to the relevant objects or facts. Now, a statement concerning appearances does not make such a claim; it says nothing about what exists or about the real character of existents. Hence, the question of truth or falsity of such statements of appearances does not arise, if the above assumption is kept in mind.

Although the sceptic refuses to attach the epithets 'true' and 'false' to the statements with regard to appearances, he, nonetheless, accepts the fact that our assent is granted only to the phenomena. What is the motive behind such an assent?

To understand this, we should first note that the sceptic employs the word 'criterion' in two different senses. One is that by which 'we judge reality or unreality', that is, the criterion of truth by which we differentiate veridical from non-veridical experiences; and the other is that which we use as a guide in ordinary life. The sceptic will not accept the possibility of any criterion of truth. But he will assent to the appearances which work as criteria for conduct of the normal life. Here the sceptic's assent to the appearances is justified on a pragmatic ground (not in the familiar pragmatist sense). The sceptic links truth with the criterion by which we make judgments regarding the things which are non-evident and not with the criterion which makes normal life possible. Sextus writes, "Adhering, then, to appearances we live in accordance with the normal rules of life, undogmatically, seeing that we cannot remain wholly inactive". (Ibid, p. 17).

The necessity of suspending judgment, according to Sextus, will not incapacitate us from actions. It is sensible to accept and accommodate ourselves to the social organization into which we are born, to obey the laws, respect the institutions and the conventions of the society in which we live. Sextus is quite

explicit in holding that suspension of judgment is not to be employed on the conduct of life. The appearances suffice for the regulation of life, but it is the non-evident that is in question in scepticism. His reason for not letting his doubts extend to the acquiescence in the appearances is that we cannot paralyze the normal life. But Sextus is, all along, cautious in maintaining the distinction between affirming the truth of what one perceives and merely acquiescing in it.

According to Sextus, we should construe the sceptic's utterance as a piece of verbal behaviour, caused by the state of perception. If, e.g., the sceptic says, "I feel cold", he is merely yielding to his natural shivering impulse to say so, not seeking to establish a truth. 'Suspension of judgment' or 'epoche' does not involve the sceptic in practical inaction or indecision, but only in refusal to make truth/falsity claims.<sup>5</sup>

Sextus hold that if inquiry is directed towards the real nature of objects, i.e., objects as they really are, doubt will somehow result. Here the state of doubt is a sort of indecision, an inability to decide between the conflicting propositions, which seem to be equally probable. Doubt is justified on the ground that there is equal evidence both for and against a proposition and, therefore no reason to prefer one alternative to the other. Hence, one must suspend judgment about them. But this suspension of judgment is not really a refraining from inquiry, a putting the question out of the mind so that one is no longer bothered by it. The very act of suspending judgment implies that judgment is being *temporarily withheld*, but the inquiry for discovering truth will be carried on. The state of indecision leads us to a state of indifference not with regard to the inquiry but towards any positive commitment about the non-evident objects. Positive commitment to positions results in mental disquietude, whereas suspension of judgment leads to mental peace. Thus Sextus remarks : "For the man who opines that anything is by nature good or bad is for ever being disquieted. . . . On the other hand, the man, who determines nothing as to what is naturally good or bad neither shuns nor pursues anything eagerly; and, in consequence, he is unperturbed". (Ibid., p. 19).

Most philosophers before the Pyrrhonists were, in some way or other, inclined to theorize some positive conclusions regard-

ding the real nature of things. More specifically, they were preoccupied with the notion that the possibility or impossibility of knowledge could be demonstrated. Aristotle, for example, asserted that the highest mode of knowledge must tell what things really are and why they are so...The Academic philosophers, on the other hand, dogmatically asserted the impossibility of knowledge about the real nature of things, i.e., non-evident objects. The sceptic avoids such extreme commitments. He is rather reluctant to theorize any positive conclusion. He will just recognize how the things appear and act accordingly to lead the day-to-day life. He deliberately abstains from any positive commitment regarding what things really are and why they are so, which, according to him is antithetical to happiness.

It would be misleading to suppose that the mental peace which the sceptic attains from the suspension of judgment regarding the real nature of things will deter the sceptic from further quest of truth. The sceptic, according to Sextus, mentions quietude in a perfunctory way, for it naturally follows the *epoche*, but he himself would not care for such a state in the least. He has an active mind and passion for enquiry. He is a seeker in the sense that although till now he has not found the truth he leaves open the possibility of finding it. To him the moment, someone makes any commitment that he has grasped the truth or the moment one asserts that truth can never be grasped, enquiry for him has reached a dead-end. The sceptic, on the other hand, is an 'open-minded enquirer.' The necessity of suspending judgment with respect to the ultimate truth neither debars the possibility of leading the day-to-day life nor does it throw the philosophic inquiry into an impasse. Sextus writes, "For to continue the investigation of problems is not inconsistent in those (the sceptics) who confess their ignorance of their (non-evident objects) real nature, but only in those (the 'Dogmatists') who believe they have an exact knowledge of them; since for the latter (the 'Dogmatists') the inquiry has already reached its goal, whereas for the former (the sceptics) the ground on which all inquiry is based—namely, the belief that they have not found the truth—still subsists." (*Ibid*, p. 158-159)

## NOTES

1. According to the Stoics all our knowledge is ultimately derived from the senses. They believed that the acquisition of knowledge from the evidence of the senses depends upon a conjunction of the presentation ( arising from an external object ) and an act of ' assent ' which is a free mental act and in our power. Carneades argued that false presentations can always be mistaken in some circumstances for true; hence, the concept of a recognizable presentation does not account for knowledge.

2. Price in his article, ' Some Considerations about Belief ' ( Knowledge and Belief, ed. A. P. Griffiths, pp. 42-59, Oxford University Press, 1967 ) took ' assent ' as one of the two elements involved in ' belief '. ' Assent ' is said to consist of two elements, one *volitional* and the other *emotional*. The former, according to him, " is analogous to choice, or preference or decision," the latter involves a " feeling of *sureness* or *confidence* with regard to it ( the belief ) ". When the sceptic assents to the phenomena he may have the volitional attitude towards a set of appearances than another not because it is more probable than the other but as it seems to be more workable than the other for executing actions. But the sceptic lacks any emotional attitude towards the phenomena.

3. In his writings Sextus presents an account of the Cyrenaic position which propagated subjectivism. According to the Cyrenaics, the affections are infallible, but we cannot grasp the objects which produce these affections. The sceptic, according to Sextus, accepts subjectivism up to the extent that these appearances seem to indicate just a state in the mind of the observer.

4. The ten *Tropes*, indicate that one should suspend judgment about all claims to knowledge extending beyond immediate experience. Our impressions of an object are observed to vary according to different perceptual conditions, each trope stressing the effect of a particular set of conditions on perceptual experience. Because of these variations, it is argued, we can say how an object appears to us but can not say what is its real nature.

5. Arne Naess contends in a similar way, " Sextus would allow that the sceptic may convey in word what *appears* to him, but in a way that does not amount to an assertion in the sense in which to assert something is positively to take a stand.... on one side or other of a contradiction " ( op. cit., p. 45 ).