

SCEPTICS AND A RELIGIOUS INSTINCT

Este artículo analiza la postura del pensamiento escéptico sobre la religión y la creencia en los dioses, llegando a la conclusión de que, aunque parezca lo contrario, el escepticismo no es ateo sino que defiende la aceptación en la creencia de los dioses, justificada por la tradición y la necesidad de rituales religiosos para la ciudad, pero sin que la capacidad racional del hombre se vea limitada por ello.

This article analyses the position of the sceptic thought about the religion and the belief in gods, and it concludes, although it seems the opposite, that the scepticism isn't atheistic but it defends the acceptance of the belief in gods justified by customs and needs of worship and sacrifices to the gods for the city, without reducing the rational dimension of man.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Escepticismo, filosofía griega, religión griega, Pirrón, Timón de Fliunte, teísmo, ateísmo.

KEY-WORDS: Scepticism, Greek philosophy, Greek religion, Pyrrho, Timon Phliasius, theism, atheism.

Sceptical pronouncement can be found in Greek writers from the very beginning. Sceptical elements can be found in Homer, Euripides, Xenophanes (Fr 34 DK), Zeno (Fr 1-4 DK), Empedocles (Fr 2 DK), Democritus (Fr 117 DK), the Sophists, and others (DL. 9.71-73; Cic., *Acad.* 1.44). But scepticism as philosophy begins in seriousness with Pyrrho.

There are few theological pronouncements made by the early Sceptics. The fullest expression of the Sceptic theological position can be found in the pinnacle of ancient Scepticism, Sextus Empiricus.

1

According to Timon, Pyrrho's disciple, to be able to enjoy happiness, one has to consider three things: "first, how things are by their nature, second, in what way we must be disposed toward them, finally, what gains are for those being so."¹ Timon also states that according to Pyrrho, things "are equally indifferent/undifferentiable, unmeasurable/unstable/uncertain, and undecidable/ undetermined/ confused; therefore, neither our sensations nor our judgments/opinions tell the truth or are mistaken; therefore then, it is necessary not to trust them, but remain without

¹ Cf. H. Diels, *PPF*, 173.

judgment/opinion, impartial, steadfast saying about each thing that it no more is than is not, or that it both is and is not, or that it neither is nor is not.”² The benefit of such a disposition is, according to Timon, abstention from assertion/reticence and then absence of trouble (ταραξία, Aristocl., *ap. Eus.*, *PE.* 14.18.2-4).

Heraclitus would agree with the statement that reality is unstable and confused. However, not all of reality is such. There is a level at which regularities are recognizable in all the changes. There is *Lógos* that controls the changes, and thus it is human inability to possess the full knowledge about the world which may lead to an opinion that we cannot say anything more beyond “everything flows.”³ Although Pyrrho may have been inspired by Heraclitus, he did not entirely share Heraclitus’ view on reality⁴. It seems that to him, reality is inherently undetermined, and thus any effort to fix reality in a set of statements is intrinsically unsuccessful. We may happen to state something true about the world, but it would be a fleeting success and we would not even be certain of it. Inability of knowing whether our statements correspond to reality should put us in a position of permanent caution: to us, whatever we say is semantically neutral, neither true nor false, even if it can be true or false, which we would not know anyway.

Of course, there remains a problem, how a pronouncement about the nature of reality should be considered. Should it be included among other untrustworthy opinions that are neither true nor false? This did not seem to be Pyrrho’s philosophical quandary. However, he could have said that, although untrustworthy, the statement about the nature of reality is a better ontological guide to epistemology than a statement that reality is stable and determinable. Importantly, however, ontology stands at the beginning of Pyrrho’s views. Ontology determines epistemology and the ethics: reality is unstable, thus knowledge is unreliable; therefore, the road to *ataraxia* leads through renunciation of any attempts to gain knowledge about the world. The world is unfathomable because of its indeterminacy⁵. Happy life is reached by accepting the fact of unreliability of any knowledge and thus abandoning any efforts to acquire it. Wisdom lies in not trying to attain knowledge⁶.

² *Ibid.*

³ Pl. *Cra.* 402 A 8-10.

⁴ Heraclitean inspiration is recognized by R. A. H. Bett, *Pyrrho, his antecedents, and his legacy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2000, 134, n. 38.

⁵ The Pyrrhonist “denies that the real nature of things can be discerned at all. This entails a disavowal of both sense perception and reason as sufficient to apprehend the real”: Ch. L. Stough, *Greek skepticism; a study in epistemology*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1969, 32; for an ontological reading of Pyrrho, see a strong case made by Bett, *op. cit.*, ch. 1.

⁶ For Pyrrho, “it was a wonderful deliverance to realize that you need not mind not knowing,” says E. Bevan, *Stoics and sceptics*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1913, 12.

Accepting the fact that Pyrrho makes an ontological pronouncement makes the Timon fragment consistent. There is no need for a forced view that among the things that are indeterminable Timon (not even Pyrrho) includes sensations and opinions⁷. Also, the ontological significance of the statement cannot be softened by saying that indeterminacy is not a term “descriptive of items in the world,” but refers to “the relation between these entities and a knowing subject.”⁸ Although a reference to this relation is included in the term “indeterminacy,” the relation is a consequence of the presumed indeterminate nature of reality. Reality itself is to blame for not knowing it: our epistemological relation to reality is what it is because reality is what it is. If inadequacy of the cognitive apparatus were at fault, the reference to indeterminacy of reality would be incomprehensible⁹.

The ontological statement indicates that it is not entirely correct that “Pyrrho’s position is fundamentally and entirely [the position] of negation: for him there is no question to ‘suspend’ the judgment but to abstain from it.”¹⁰ But it seems that this abstention from judgment was not total. True, according to Pyrrho’s contemporary, Antigonos of Carystus,¹¹ he did not pay attention to anything around him when walking down the street, “whether it be wagons or precipices or the dogs,” and was constantly watched by pupils so that no walk ended in an accident (DL 9.62). However, it may very well be true that this portrayal is simply “a sort of critical caricature of sceptical philosophers”¹², an apocryphal product to ridicule scepticism¹³. Diogenes Laertius hastens to add that according to Aenesidemus only

⁷ J. Brunschwig, “Once again on Eusebius on Aristocles on Timon on Pyrrho”, *Papers in Hellenistic philosophy*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1994, 199-202, 210-211.

⁸ Stough, *op. cit.*, 18.

⁹ There is thus no denying of the objective existence of reality. The problem is with our access to it. Therefore, it would be very difficult to accept the statement that “Neither senses nor judgment are the ‘place’ in which things would reveal their ‘being,’ and this is not because of some sort of impotence or a lack of the senses and the judgments, but because things ‘are’ nothing. The idea that things could ‘be’ something [...] should be completely banned”: M. Conche, *Pyrrhon ou l'apparence*, Paris, PUF, 1994, 97. The Pyrrhonist never suspends a judgment about the existence of the world. “The subject matter of the sceptic’s investigation —and thus what he will find himself suspending judgment about— is what the honey is really like. What he does not question is whether the honey is actually there”: S. Everson, “The objective appearance of Pyrrhonism”, *Psychology*, Cambridge University Press 1991, 127.

¹⁰ L. Robin, *Pyrrhon et le scepticisme grec*, Paris, PUF, 1944, 14, 19.

¹¹ On reliability of Antigonos, see Bett, *op. cit.*, 8.

¹² M. Frede, “The skeptic’s beliefs”, *Essays in ancient philosophy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, 181; “irresponsible invention” and “hostile fabrications,” Bett, *op. cit.*, 75, 93.

¹³ N. Rescher, *Scepticism: a critical reappraisal*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1980, 214, n. 1; it is just a slander, R. J. Hankinson, *The sceptics*, London, Routledge, 1995, 65. A somewhat picturesque explanation is offered by Conche, *op. cit.*, 135: in Pyrrho’s behavior “it was a question of public lesson. The subject of the lesson: appearance. Pyrrhonian pantomime takes place before the spectators who are his pupils. Pyrrho, who was a painter and a poet, is also an actor. He appears on the scene in a play with a pedagogical goal where the pupils play secondary roles”.

Pyrrho's philosophy was limited to the suspension of judgment, and in life he did not act carelessly, which is confirmed by the fact that he reached the age of 90. Similarly, Galen says that in everyday life Pyrrho followed what is evident (*Subfig. Emp.* 82.26). This may mean that sceptical philosophy did not overshadow common sense, and, unreliable as they may be, he relied on the testimony of appearances, according to Aenesidemus (DL. 9.106). Pyrrho acknowledges that "men do all things as a result of convention and customs" and "he was consistent with this view in his way of living" (DL. 9.61-62). Similarly, Aristocles says that for Pyrrho, we should "live according to nature and customs" (Eus., *PE.* 14.18.20). In that respect, Pyrrho is the same as other ancient sceptics, in particular, Sextus Empiricus. Pyrrho's attitude is also evidenced by the fact that he was elected to be a priest¹⁴.

The importance of ontology in early Pyrrhonism is confirmed by very interesting pronouncements made by Pyrrho's follower, Timon. In *Images*, Timon says, "having a correct standard, I will say what appears to me to be a word of truth, [namely] that the nature of the divine and the good is eternal, from which is derived the most equable life for man" (S.E., *P.* 11.20).

An attempt is made to tone down the ontological tenor of the divine/good fragment so that the nature of the divine and the good is merely what is a source of a tranquil life. In this way, human character and attitudes are the divine and the good¹⁵. However, the dogmatic ingredient is not entirely eradicated since the source of *ataraxia* —the divine and the good— is stated in positive terms. "A degree of dogmatism intrudes after all."¹⁶

The fragment is dismissed by the argument that the speaker in the fragment is not identified and Sextus does not say that Pyrrho is the speaker¹⁷. However, the dismissal is not final because there is still a problem of compatibility of the view expressed in this fragment with other views of Timon. Timon says that he does not affirm that honey is sweet but he agrees that it appears to be so (DL. 9.105). He says that suspension of judgment is a sceptic's goal, which is followed, like a shadow, by *ataraxia* (DL. 9.107)¹⁸.

¹⁴ It is thus not quite likely that Pyrrho "maintained a spectacular unconcern for behaving as custom and convention prescribe," and had "no time for convention," as claimed by Bett, *op. cit.*, 108, 110. Bett himself states that it is "difficult to believe" that someone honored with a priesthood "was a lunatic, a menace to himself and others" by his unconventional behavior (p. 67).

¹⁵ M. Burnyeat, "Tranquillity without a stop: Timon, frag. 68", *Classical Quarterly* 30, 1980, 86-93.

¹⁶ Burnyeat, *art. cit.*, 89. Also, the author makes an emendation of the fragment and he just leaves it to the reader to show that his emendation has a parallel (p. 92).

¹⁷ R. Bett, "What did Pyrrho think about 'the nature of the divine and the good'?", *Phronesis* 39, 1994, 305, 326-332; Bett, *Pyrrho, op. cit.*, 100, 102; Conche, *op. cit.*, 183.

¹⁸ "Nothing voluntary, nothing predictable. One would say it is an illumination if the term did not appear to be too strong, if it did not have a mystical or romantic flavor," comments on such an

In one place, Sextus says that “there is not anything either good or bad by nature, ‘but these things are judged by the mind (by convention?) by men,’ to quote Timon” (S.E., *P*.11.140). There is a strong suggestion here that “these things” refer to the good and the bad, but they may refer to what goes before, namely to the disturbance caused by avoidance of the bad and pursuit of the good, or to the avoidance and the pursuit itself, which seems to be the most natural solution. What is to be avoided and pursued is judged by the mind (or by convention). The question of the nature and the existence of the good and the bad does not have to intervene in such considerations. The existence of the good and the bad is not contradictory with the way in which practical issues should be judged. It is possible to assume that the good is eternal and somehow influences the conventions ruling everyday practice of ordinary people (or the rules used by mind). People do not need to be philosophically concerned about what stands behind these conventions. Everyday life should be guided by the conventions without tracing them back every time to the divine and the good. Such tracing may not be even possible because of the inscrutability of the divine and the good. A very dogmatic statement may suffice that there is a link from the good to conventions, but the statement is also sceptical in that the nature of the link and the nature of the good will remain forever concealed.

Whether Timon would agree with Pyrrho that reality is indeterminate is uncertain, but it would not be impossible to reconcile Pyrrho’s view with Timon’s statement on the divine and the good. Inscrutability of the divine and the good is caused by their indeterminacy. In this, Timon would be closer to Heraclitus than Pyrrho. With Heraclitus, he would say that indeterminacy does not exhaust reality. There are regularities behind it, the divine and the good, but these regularities and their nature are never accessible to us. Heraclitus can say something positive about *Lógos*; Timon, at best, can say that there is some ontological determinacy behind phenomenal indeterminacy, but because reality is accessible to us only through appearance, this deeper level of reality forever remains beyond our grasp. Reality shows itself to us only through appearance, and, truly, “the appearance prevails everywhere, wherever it comes from,” as Timon phrases it (DL. 9.105). The appearance is, for better or worse, the only way by which we are in touch with objective reality. For worse, because appearances are chaotic, irregular, uncertain, transient, unreliable, indeterminate. The same thing is seen at the same time differently by different people; the *Rashomon* phenomenon is a common occurrence rather than a figment of Kurosawa’s imagination. For better, because

appearance of *ataraxia* J. Grenier, “L’exigence d’intelligibilité du Sceptique grec”, *Revue Philosophique* 1957, 326.

this is the guide we can use in everyday life. Unreliable for philosophical and scientific purposes, appearances are sufficiently reliable for here and now¹⁹.

Timon probably did not differ by much in his views from Pyrrho, if at all. It would be hard to assume that a pupil, who derides the views of philosophers other than his teacher and for whom his teacher leads a way for men like a sun-god, espouses views that significantly differ from him.

The scant statements and testimonies about Pyrrho-Timon's opinions allow us to say that ontology was not without significance although it was not a focus of attention. Reality is pronounced as indeterminate. But this reality exists, although very little can be said about its nature. One thing seems certain: the eternal good and the divine are somehow the source of equanimity, but we better not try to fathom the nature of the divine and the nature of the way the divine leads to the equanimity because it is beyond our reach anyway. There is an opaque screen of appearance behind which reality and the divine are hidden, and we can only vaguely say that flickers of this reality reach us, but we cannot form a consistent, lasting, clear picture of it. Conceptual grasp is impossible, but this is not tantamount to the denial of the existence of reality, including the good and the divine²⁰.

2

Timon left no disciples (DL. 9.115). Pyrrhonism ceased to exist as a school, but its spirit finds home in the Academy. Whether scepticism in the Academy was directly influenced by Pyrrho and Timon is debatable. They may have provided an impulse in that direction after the Academy reacted to the dogmatism of Plato by reverting to Socrates' scepticism and carrying it to the extreme.

Arcesilaus, the founder of the Middle Academy is said to have suspended judgment about everything (Plu., *Mor.: Adv. Col.* 1120c; S.E., *P.* 1.232; DL. 4.32). He "denied that there is anything that can be known, not even what Socrates had left for himself"; nothing can be known, discerned, or understood, thus, "it is proper not to acknowledge or affirm or approve the assent to anything" (Cic., *Acad.* 1.45;

¹⁹ "Appearances are to be accepted and adhered to, not because humans can establish their true nature, but because they need a basis for practical affairs": L. Groarke, *Greek scepticism: anti-realist trends in ancient thought*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990, 94.

²⁰ In this sense, it is true that Pyrrho-Timon's atheism is conceptual, not ontological, or "conceptual atheism, not just existential", says Conche, *op. cit.*, 182. For Conche, a conceptual atheism is the ultimate. He says that even atheists do not renounce the concept of the divine. They "did not dare to say that the divine is corruptible, although they do not believe in its existence; although they do not admit the existence of the incorruptible, they at least retain the concept" (Plu., *Mor.: de comm. not.* 1075a). But Pyrrho goes even further with his conceptual atheism. It seems, however, that conceptual atheism is possible without ontological atheism. Conche somewhat incongruously with his previous statement also says that Pyrrho is neither atheist nor theist and God for him "is not more existing than nonexistent": *ibid.*, 202.

2.73). However, Arcesilaus' role is not limited to just saying no. "Arcesilaus really did not fight with Zeno to criticize [him], but wished to discover the truth" (S.E., *P.* 7.76). There was at least a desire on his part to arrive at positive truth about the world if only through his attempts to refute the Stoic views. He is at least certain that "in their very nature, *epoché* is good and assent is bad" (S.E., *P.* 1.233), which certainly is a statement worthy of a "second-order dogmatist."²¹ More importantly, after suspending judgment, a guiding principle about everything is the idea of the reasonable (τὸ ἐκλογον), whereby anyone can act rightly and attain happiness (S.E., *P.* 7.158).²² For the Stoics, the reasonable is "a proposition which has more chances of being true" (DL. 7.76), but as a term of ordinary Greek, it did not have to have, for Arcesilaus, a connection to truth. It could be just a criterion of action²³. But this may be largely a verbal differentiation. Can any criterion be a good criterion of action if it is not, in some sense, a criterion of truth at the same time? How can one act properly if a reference to truth is removed from the very criterion of a proper action? When it comes to real life, then, Arcesilaus ceases to be a pure sceptic and admits some elements of dogmatism. Life by denial is not sustainable in the long run. And it is doubtful that such a life guarantees happiness.

The sceptic approach is continued by the founder of the New Academy, Carneades. He defined himself and his life as a fight with Stoicism ("if there were no Chrysippus, I would not be," DL. 4.62). This fight was, however, carried on primarily in the sceptical spirit. There is very little positive input of his own.

New Academicians prove that "it is not possible to perceive anything even with reason and inference" (Cic., *Acad.* 2.42). They say that "for the discovery of the truth, one should argue against all things and for all things," but they do not say what they discovered (*ibid.* 2.60).

Unlike Arcesilaus, Carneades said that "it was impossible for a man to suspend judgment on all matters and there was a difference between nonevident and nonapprehensible and while everything was nonapprehensible, everything was not nonevident" (Eus., *PE* 14.7.15). Life without assent is impossible; there must be some assent, but without commitment. He says that the wise never assents, but by "following plausibility wherever it occurs or is absent; he can answer 'yes' or 'no'" merely by following a corresponding presentation, but the answer must be without total assent (Cic., *Acad.* 2.104). There is a rather uncontroversial way of understanding these pronouncements. Because reality is too vast for anyone's mind,

²¹ Hankinson, *op. cit.*, 85.

²² It requires a special effort to interpret Arcesilaus' statement about the reasonable to be able to state that "there is no evidence for ascribing any positive epistemological doctrine to him," as claimed by G. Striker, "Sceptical strategies", en M. Schofield *et al.* (eds.), *Doubt and dogmatism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1980, 69.

²³ Hankinson, *op. cit.*, 88-90.

or even for collective effort of all of humanity, to be fully grasped, it never can be fully comprehended. Comprehension of the simplest part of reality requires the knowledge of the relations between the part and other parts of the world. These relations change from one moment to another, and thus no one can have a total knowledge of even one time slice of the world. Reality and everything in it is nonapprehensible. But we may have an insight into the workings of reality; some knowledge —partial and incomplete— is possible, some parts of reality are better known than others, some things about the world are clearer, more evident than others. Not everything is concealed, not everything is uncertain, nonevident. If we accept something as knowledge, this must be done with the qualification that the knowledge is incomplete, transitory, a sure subject of modification and amplification. If so, a Carneadean sceptic would be an overcautious lover of knowledge in which the degree of caution in constantly repeating “assent, but do not commit yourself” may become an inhibiting factor in expanding knowledge. Carneades himself exhibits an extraordinary scope of knowledge to show how unreliable knowledge is.

Carneades’ interest in theology is expressed in the many arguments against the existence of God and the gods (Cic., *ND* 3.29-34, 43-52; S.E., *P.* 9.138-190). There are eighteen arguments in S.E., *P.* 9.138-181, and about six of them there is little doubt that they are Carneades’ (1-4 (*ibid.* 9.138-147), 6 (*ibid.* 9.151), 18 (*ibid.* 9.180)²⁴.

The arguments are primarily directed against the Stoics. In the first argument, it is assumed after the Stoics that the gods are living beings (animals) and then there is a counterargument: if they are living beings, they have sensations “for every living being is conceived as a living being by its participation in sensation.” Also gods, “as Carneades said,” should have even more senses than five to be able “to grasp more things” than humans. “It must be said, then, that God has the sense of taste,” whereby he will be pleased with some things and displeased with others, but

²⁴ All arguments in Cic., *ND* 3.29-34 are explicitly attributed to Carneades and these arguments correspond very closely to the arguments presented by Sextus: S.E., *P.* 9.139-141 = Cic. *ND* 3.32, S.E., *P.* 9.146-147 = Cic. *ND* 3.30, S.E., *P.* 9.151 = Cic., *ND* 3.29, S.E., *P.* 9.161-165 = Cic. *ND* 3.32-33, S.E., *P.* 9.162 = Cic. *ND* 3.38, S.E., *P.* 9.180-181 = Cic., *ND* 3.34; K. Hartfelder, “Die Kritik des Götterglaubens bei Sextus Emp. adv. math. IX, 1-194”, *Rheinisches Museum* 36, 1881, 231; C. Vick, “Karneades’ Kritik der Theologie bei Cicero und Sextus Empiricus”, *Hermes* 37, 1902, 235-238; A. A. Long, “Scepticism about gods in Hellenistic philosophy”, en M. Griffith-D. J. Mastronarde (eds.), *Cabinet of the Muses*, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1990, 289, n. 5; Hankinson, *op. cit.*, 242-3, 347, n. 11. In turn, the sorites arguments are attributed to Carneades by Sextus, and three of them more or less correspond to the sorites arguments found in Cicero (S.E., *P.* 9.182-183 = Cic. *ND* 3.52, S.E., *P.* 9.185 = Cic. *ND* 3.51, S.E., *P.* 9.187-188 = Cic. *ND* 3.44, S.E., *P.* 9.189 = Cic. *ND* 3.52), Hartfelder, *op. cit.*, 232; Vick, *op. cit.*, 241-245; P. Couissin, “Les sorites de Carnéade contre le polythéisme”, *Revue des Études Grecques* 54, 1941, 43-44. Cf. a selection of texts included by B. Wisniewski, *Karneades, ‘Fragmente’*, Wrocław, Ossolineum, 1970, frs. 93-96.

displeasure leads to a change for the worse and eventually to perishability. “Therefore, gods do not exist” (S.E., *P.* 9.139-141). However, the argument does not hold. First, it is just an assumption that living beings must be endowed with senses. If the gods—not the gods of mythology, though—are beings from a higher level of reality than humans, they may be considered alive but devoid of sensation. Their activity may be mental, and Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover is certainly such a being. But even if the gods are sentient beings, they do not have to have the same senses as humans, in particular, no taste sensation (although the Epicurean gods do). But even if they have the sense of taste, they in their wisdom may know which things lead to displeasure and so they may avoid them. But even if they do not avoid things which may cause displeasure and thus a change for the worst, the sense of pleasure would lead to a change for the better and thus balance the change for the worse. If such a balance can be assured for all of eternity, then displeasure does not have to doom the gods to perdition. But even if such a balance is not possible, the deterioration process may be so long lasting that all the gods may currently exist even if not in such a blissful state as in the days of old, and thus the conclusion that they do not exist does not follow (but the conclusion, that they are mortal, does, as stated by Cic., *ND* 3.32, which in the light of the Stoic doctrine of the periodic world conflagration is not unacceptable for the Stoics)²⁵.

Arguments 2 and 3 reported by Sextus are very similar, but different senses are used instead. Argument 4, derives denial of divine imperishability from sentience. Sentience leads to a change and God “being receptive of change, he will certainly be receptive of change for the worse,” and thus God is perishable (S.E., *P.* 9.146-147, Cic., *ND* 3.29,32,34). However, as before, there is no inevitability in a change to a change for the worse. It may also be a change for the better and the gains resulting from the latter changes may outweigh the losses stemming from changes for the worse.

Argument 6, found in Sextus, says that God cannot be incorporeal because incorporeality means inability to be sentient and be active. Again, the case of the Unmoved Mover can be used as an example of an incorporeal divinity that is active through thinking. Also, the argument continues, God cannot be corporeal because “every body is subject of change and perishable, whereas the divine is imperishable” (S.E., *P.* 9.151). But again, this is a *non sequitur* because changeability does not entail perishability. Moreover, if God is corporeal—argument 6 continues in argument 18—and compound, he is perishable because what has parts must necessarily dissolve. If corporeal God is a simple body, that is,

²⁵ Even the assumption of constant deterioration does not have to spell the doom of the gods if a version of the Zeno argument is used: they deteriorate in one unit of time by one hypothetical unit of depreciation, in the next unit of time, by a half of the depreciation unit, in the next by a fourth of such a depreciation unit, etc., *ad infinitum*.

one of the four elements, he is without soul or reason (S.E., *P.* 9.180-181). The argument relies on unproven assumptions: why that which is composed of parts should dissolve? Why a simple element cannot have reason? The Stoic God is a fiery being and is identified with *Lógos*.

The arguments are based on very dogmatic assumptions, and not all of these assumptions can be considered Stoic and assumed to be made for the sake of argument. Therefore, they are largely misfired and far from fatal for the Stoic views which they intended to undermine.

There is also a series of sorites arguments, or chain arguments. One such argument states that if Aphrodite is a goddess, so is Eros, her son, is a divinity. But if Eros, who is love, is a god, so is Eleos, pity, who was worshipped like Eros. If pity, then Phobos, fear, should also be a god because an unknown poet writes about fear as a god. If fear is a god, then any other affection should be considered as a divinity (S.E., *P.* 9.187-188). This argument illustrates the shifts in *tertium comparationis* used throughout the sorites arguments. Aphrodite and Eros are linked by kinship, Eros and Eleos by the fact that both are worshipped, Eleos and Phobos because both are affections and one is a god because of the existing worship, the other because of a poet's statement. Phobos and other affections are linked because of the similar nature. There is, thus, a lack of consistency in the argument, whereby it ceases to be convincing. One may argue that Aphrodite is a goddess, so her son, Eros, is a god, so is a flute because both Eros and the flute have an ability to produce sounds, and so is a table because the flute and the table are made from wood. In this way it can easily be proven that everything is divine.

Another argument says that if Zeus is a god, so is Poseidon, as his brother, and so is Achelous and the Nile and thus every river and thus every stream and thus every torrent (S.E., *P.* 9.182-183). In this way, a chain is formed in which each link is purportedly a consequence of the previous link. However, although the divinity of Poseidon is implied by his kinship with Zeus, the criterion abruptly changes, and Poseidon's divinity implies the divinity of rivers presumably because Poseidon is the god of the sea. However, being the god of the sea, he is not the sea—at least, not in popular mythology—and thus the fact that rivers and seas are bodies of water is insufficient to conclude that rivers are deities because Poseidon is, although some rivers were considered to be deities. However, even that is insufficient to claim that each body of water—a stream, its source, a puddle, a drop of water—is a deity. Admittedly, in their struggle to reconcile monotheism with polytheism of traditional mythology, the Stoics claimed that Poseidon is the sea (Cic., *ND* 2.66). Why should that obligate them to accept that every river, source, and torrent is a god? The point is that not every body of water is considered a deity. It must be sufficiently large, and the sea certainly is not small. It is, therefore, not quite true that “if we substitute for the name of a god the force of nature or material that the

god represents, we are lead to considering as divinities everything that depends on that force or that material.”²⁶

For this reason the following argument is misfired; Demeter is the earth-mother, and if she is a goddess, then also the mountains and cliffs and every stone would be deities (S.E., *P.* 9.189). However, Carneades almost certainly would not agree with the statement that because Socrates is a philosopher, so is his hand and his leg and his hair.

One sorites argument states that if the sun is a god, so is a day, and so is a month, but also a part of the day, etc. (S.E., *P.* 9.184). Why should divinity of the sun entail the divinity of the day? Because there is no day without the sun? This would be all the more a reason for a day not to be divine.

In sum, the sorites arguments are far from convincing. It is true that in these arguments, “our reasons to consider one being as a god leads us to give this title to another one; from the latter, we go to the third, etc.”²⁷. The problem is what these reasons are, and in Carneades’ arguments the reasons seem to be very fluid. It does not help to state that the arguments seem to indicate that for Carneades, *tertium comparationis* of any kind is acceptable to generate his chains. It requires some effort to consider such reasoning convincing. The reasoning looks more like a playful argument than something to be used in a serious debate. “Apparently, Carneades thought that these arguments proved the incoherence of the Stoic notion of divinity”, but it is far from clear how exactly Carneades thought that “these kinds of arguments would contest the Stoic theology.”²⁸ Thus, considering such arguments captious and “a serious challenge to Stoic theology” is much too generous²⁹.

In spite of these arguments against the existence of the gods, and although it is true that “it is hard to escape the feeling that most [of his argumentation] is based on an unspoken belief that gods do not exist”³⁰, Carneades explicitly says that his intention is not to promote atheism, but only to show that Stoic arguments are not sufficient to prove the existence of God (Cic, *de div.* 2.148; cf. *ND* 3.44). Similarly, in the name of the Sceptics, Sextus states that “we say undogmatically that the gods exist and we revere them and we say that they have foreknowledge [are providential]” (*P.* 3.2). Sceptics declare themselves as not being against religion, but against theology; they only question the dogmatists’ account of the gods. The proofs of their existence and the investigation of the nature of the divine is,

²⁶ Couissin, *art. cit.*, 47.

²⁷ Couissin, *art. cit.*, 47.

²⁸ S. Knuuttila-J. Sihvola, “Ancient scepticism and philosophy of religion”, en J. Sihvola (ed.), *Ancient scepticism and the sceptical tradition*, Helsinki, The Philosophical Society of Finland, 2000, 132.

²⁹ Hankinson, *op. cit.*, 244.

³⁰ E. L. Minar, “The positive beliefs of the Skeptic Carneades”, *Classical Weekly* 43, 1949, 68.

according to them, at least inconclusive and very likely erroneous. The solution is to refrain from such investigations, leave theology aside, and adhere to religion. But how this can be understood?

3

From earliest times, Scepticism met with the common argument that it is impossible to act and conduct everyday life by suspending opinion in everything. Practical life is impossible when presentations or assent are abolished (when “all action out of life” is removed, Cic., *Acad.* 2.39; cf. *ibid.* 2.31, 53, 58, 99). The Epicurean Colotes asks an Academic sceptic, “How is it that someone who suspends judgment does not rush away into a mountain rather than to a bath.”³¹

Sextus Empiricus directly addresses such criticism and lists four ways in which people are guided in everyday life. First, it is the guidance of nature, whereby we are capable of sensation and thought; second, the compulsion of natural drives, such as hunger and thirst; third, “the tradition of the customs and laws” leading to the acceptance of “piety in the conduct of life as good and impiety as bad”; finally, instructions in arts and crafts. And all that can be done without belief (S.E., *P.* 1.23-24, cf. *ibid.* 1.17, 226, 231, 2.246, 254, 3.235 and 11.165-166). These four guidelines seem to be sufficient, because everyday life has just four parts (aspects), which are the ones to which the guidelines refer (S.E., *P.* 1.237-238).

The juxtaposition of the four areas and the strong emphasis that no belief should accompany what is done in everyday life seems to reflect the idea that such things should be done instinctively, on impulse. This is obvious in the case of following the drives. When one is hungry, the search for food follows, which can be observed in the animal world. Animals do not contemplate on their hunger and their food, but just do it on instinct, unreflectively and yet very effectively. In that respect, the Sceptic reduces humans to the level of animals. Similarly, with other areas.

Consider acquiring some skills in a particular trade. What one does as, say, a carpenter, should be done without a belief. This seems quite unrealistic; however, to some extent, it is not so unreasonable. When one learns how to drive a car (or a chariot), he thinks about which pedal should be pressed at a particular moment, which does make driving better, but not because thinking helps in driving, but because thinking eventually leads to an automatism when one drives without reflecting on it. This is a difference between the skill of an expert master and a

³¹ Plu., *Mor.*: *Adv. Col.* 1122e, (cf. 1107d, 1108d, 1119cd). Similarly, Gal., *De dignosc. puls.* 8.781.16-783.5. Such an argument has already been used by Aristotle against those who deny the law of noncontradiction: “Why does one not walk early some morning into a well or over a precipice, if one happens to be in the way,” Arist., *Metaph.* 1008b15-16. See also DL. 9.104.

novice³². One problem for artificial intelligence researchers when building expert systems that replicate the skills of human experts is to extract knowledge from the human experts they use, because the experts have a difficulty verbalizing it. One becomes an expert when some things are done unreflectively, on instinct, by internalized experience. Already Meister Eckhart observed that when learning how to write, the pupil has to think about each letter, but when he knows how to write, “he will not have to stop to think, but he will write fluently and freely —and the same with playing the fiddle or any other task that requires skill. All he needs to know is that he intends to exercise his skill, and even if he is not paying full attention, wherever his thoughts may stray, he will do the job because he has the skill.”³³ Sextus seems to claim that a carpenter can acquire such automatism by trying, by osmosis of sorts, by participating in the process of building a cabinet or a house with seasoned carpenters and mimicking them, all the time trying to restrain himself from a belief; but belief in what? That the process is effective? That it makes sense to do something a certain way? A learning process with constant *epoché* may be realistic for simple skills but is certainly unrealistic in most arts and crafts. When Sextus says that “a physician is led by the natural drive to what is appropriate —by contraction to dilatation” (*PH* 1.238)³⁴, then he assumes that there is a natural arts and craft faculty, and like linguistic competence allows us to learn any language, so the arts and craft faculty allows us to acquire any skill. This is a tacit and very strong, dogmatic assumption about the psychological constitution of the human being. One has to strongly belief in it to make a pronouncement about belief-free execution of any art or craft.

It seems that the matter of following customs should be solved in a similar vein. Customs should be followed not by reflecting on them or believing in them, but automatically, as a matter of reflex. To be capable of doing this, there should be some faculty which would allow for an instinctive reaction to particular customs and laws. Religion is included under that heading. Because there is particular religious tradition in particular city or state, the inhabitants should follow religious practices and prescriptions to act piously. “We accept piety [...] as good,” says the Sceptic (S.E., *P.* 1.23), because the instinct leads us this way. Belief should have nothing to do with that. “Following ordinary life without belief, we say that there

³² The problem is discussed in H. L. Dreyfus-S. E. Dreyfus, *Mind over machine*, New York, Free Press, 1986, ch. 1.

³³ The talks of instruction, in his *Sermons and treatises*, v. 3, Shaftesbury, Element, 1987, 19. Cf. observations of the psychoanalyst Heinz Hartmann, when he writes about automatization: a goal is kept in mind without concentrating upon steps leading to it: L. Miller, *Inner natures*, New York, St. Martin’s Press, 1990, 14-15.

³⁴ “That must seem fantastical as an account of medical practice; but I suppose it is to be taken seriously,” observes Jonathan Barnes, “The beliefs of a Pyrrhonist” [1982], M. Burnyeat - M. Frede, *The original Sceptics*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1997, p.84.

are gods and we revere the gods" (*ibid.* 3.2 and 9.49), but this statement is caused by an instinctual reaction to the customs of the land, not by belief. There is thus a religious instinct of sorts that, like hunger and thirst, makes one act in a particular fashion. Following the instinct is sufficient to act properly, no belief is needed. It is enough to rely on an innate endowment. And again we encounter a tacit assumption that such a religious instinct exists, which is by no means obvious. Apparently, the Sceptic would be pleased with attempts to explain religion by physiology by locating in the brain an area responsible for religious experience, so that the experience is but a result of the activity of the brain³⁵.

It has already been mentioned that Pyrrho and Timon advocated adherence to the prevailing customs in everyday life. According to Sextus, Pyrrhonists follow customs, Academicians the plausible (S.E., *P.* 1.226-227). There is no testimony that Carneades recommends following established opinions. However, because of his criterion of plausibility, he is in agreement with the Pyrrhonist in that respect³⁶. Carneades takes as a criterion the plausible impression which is also convincing, unreversed and thoroughly tested so that the criterion can be suitable "for the conduct of life and the attainment of happiness" (S.E., *P.* 7.166). No rigid or scientific conditions are imposed by Carneades upon what exactly the criterion should be to become convincing and thoroughly tested, and thus it seems inescapable that a reference to accepted rules, opinions, laws, and customs would constitute for him a way of making the criterion valid in including religious life. Therefore, Sextus' third guide, laws and customs, can be considered a common feature to all the Sceptics. If they want religious observance without belief, they are obligated to assume that there is an instinct (custom instinct or, more particularly, a religious instinct) that leads directly to religious observances without mediation of belief. That is, a belief in an existence of an instinct allows for a claim that everyday life without belief is possible for a Sceptic³⁷. The Sceptic cannot escape making assumptions.

The reliance on instincts in all areas of everyday life should bring happiness. Whether this is a desirable happiness, is another matter³⁸. The Sceptic' unreflective life may not appear appealing. The Sceptic believes that by turning back to any

³⁵ For a discussion of the problem of "neurotheology," see Gregory R. Peterson, *Minding God: theology and the cognitive sciences*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2003, ch. 5.

³⁶ Stough, *op. cit.*, 64.

³⁷ Inconsistency is thus not in the fact that "In suspending judgment about *p*, I do not believe it. In yielding to custom and habit and believing it, however mildly, I do believe it", as stated by T. Penelhum, *God and skepticism*, Dordrecht, Reidel, 1983, 54. It is rather, between belief in an instinct and life without belief. It is true, however, that Sextus advocates "belieflless piety" (p. 13), which should not be equated with "a simple religious faith uncontaminated by theological argument" (p. 14).

³⁸ It was observed correctly that for some, giving up a search for rational grounds may lead to "intensified anxiety, even to despair" rather than to quietude: Penelhum, *op. cit.*, 55-56.

source of contention and disagreement through *epoché*, he will assure a life of contentment³⁹. Unhappiness is a result of some perturbation which, in turn, is a result of an eager pursuit of what is believed to be good or of eager avoidance of things believed to be evil. A dogmatist will not be happy by believing that some things are good or evil by nature (S.E., *P.* 11.112-113). When a good is not attained, unhappiness results; when it is attained, one is unhappy because of the fear of losing it (*ibid.* 11.116-117, 146). Also, if such happiness, if such peace is attainable, “it is peace without dignity: it is profoundly egoistic; besides, the notion of obligation is absent from it.”⁴⁰ If nothing is certain, why should one be obligated toward anyone or anything? Why attempt to satisfy someone else’s needs if these needs cannot be known with certainty and thus can be misjudged and the needy can be ill-served? It is better not to undertake anything beyond what the prevailing custom compels us to do.

What the Sceptic advocates is really life of conformism. Science has hardly any place in the Sceptic world. Why waste time on reflecting on the concealed mechanism of the universe if this may bring disagreement, uncertainty, years of testing of hypotheses with no assured result? *Ataraxia* is accessible here and now, it is only sufficient to refrain from any belief. In religion, the Sceptic encourages hypocrisy, unreflectively following prevailing customs, worshipping deities that happen to be worshipped in the state, and detached practice of prescribed rituals. Religion becomes just a part of social routine driven by a religious instinct and thus is reduced to the level of physical drives on the same level as hunger and thirst. Should human sacrifices be made because the custom requires it? According to the Sceptic, it would be hard luck for those who live in a society where religion requires such sacrifices. The practice should be followed because instinct drives us to it being conditioned by the prevailing observances. There is no room for reflection on why practices in different places are different and whether some of them are preferable over others. Preference would require belief. And if, with Arcesilaus, gradation of plausibility is assumed to be a guide, the gradation is shaped by the customs of the land, anyway.

The Sceptic does not endorse theism, but he does not endorse atheism, either. He states that there are absurd consequences of atheism. He says, for example, that atheism is unacceptable because “if gods do not exist, neither will piety since piety

³⁹ Usually truth and reason are used to determine whether the sceptic has beliefs. However, a view is expressed that “scepticism has its roots in criteria of different kind: inquiry and disagreement. The sceptic [...] suspends judgment about everything which is a matter of inquiry and disagreement (*diaphonia*) and assents to everything which is not”: M. A. Włodarczyk, *Pyrrhonian inquiry*, Cambridge, Cambridge Philological Society, 2000, 7, 51 (based on S.E., *P.* 1.8), not “about appearances themselves, but about what underlies them” (p. 8).

⁴⁰ Ch. Waddington, *Pyrrhon et le pyrrhonisme* [1876], in his *La philosophie ancienne et la critique historique*, Paris, Hachette, 1904, 340.

is the knowledge of service to the gods; but piety does exist, so, too, do the gods” (S.E., *P.* 9.123, many more such arguments, including Carneades’ arguments, are presented in 9.124-193). In religious matters, “the Sceptic will be found acknowledging the gods according to the customs of his country and the laws, and doing everything which tends to their proper worship and reverence. But in the region of philosophical inquiry he makes no rash assertions” (S.E., *P.* 9.49). No one is exempted from this attitude. In Cicero, Cotta, an Academic spokesman, is a *pontifex* of the Roman state who, as befits his profession, advocates the worship and sacrifices to the gods and recognizes the fact that the greatness of Rome would be impossible without “the supreme benevolence of the immortal gods” (*ND* 3.5-6), but he concentrates on rebutting the Stoics arguments for the existence and nature of the divine, concluding with a one-sentence long declaration that his intention was not to deny their existence (*ibid.* 3.93). If any theological discussion should be excluded, if any discourse about the sphere of the divine should be avoided, one can wonder what it means to be a priest. For Cotta, customs are not just the argument for religious ceremonies, but for the greatness of Rome. In this way, his priestly functions acquire more of a political than religious character. If the observances of traditional rites strengthen the state, they should be followed. There is no need for theology. Theology is bad for the state because it may undermine the religious tradition, and bad for the individual because it only brings unhappiness. Rationality should be excluded from any investigation, both the investigation of the sacred and the profane. What was understood as the highest faculty of man should be set aside if individual happiness and the greatness of the state is to be achieved. Pyrrho’s remark, after he was scared by a dog and fled to a tree, that although it is difficult to “strip off humanity,” one should strive for it by deeds or at least by words⁴¹, should be extended to the rational dimension of man: a Sceptic should strip off his humanity by suppressing this dimension. Happiness inevitably follows.

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⁴¹ In spite of an assurance that in this incident, “there is no doubt that it is a question of pedagogical gesture”: Conche, *art. cit.*, 139; the significance of the incident cannot be dismissed so easily.