

Introduction

Ancient Skepticism, Voluntarism, and Science

Anjan Chakravartty

University of Notre Dame

chakravartty.1@nd.edu

Abstract

In this introduction, I motivate the project of examining certain resonances between ancient skeptical positions, especially Pyrrhonism, and positions in contemporary epistemology, with special attention to recent work in the epistemology of science. One such resonance concerns the idea of suspension of judgment or belief in certain contexts or domains of inquiry, and the reasons for (or processes eventuating in) suspension. Another concerns the question of whether suspension of belief in such circumstances is voluntary, in any of the senses discussed in current work on voluntarism in epistemology, which informs recent discussions of how voluntarism regarding epistemic stances may shed light on positions like scientific realism and antirealism. The aim of this special issue is thus to explore certain analogies and disanalogies between ancient and contemporary debates about skepticism, and to consider whether and to what extent the former can provide insight into the latter.

Keywords

skepticism – Pyrrhonism – voluntarism – stances – scientific realism

Several years ago, after wondering why I was so lucky as to have a steady stream of students of ancient philosophy appearing in my graduate seminars in philosophy of science, it occurred to me that I could solve the mystery by asking. Colleagues in ancient philosophy had been telling these students that learning some contemporary philosophy of science would be good for them, since in their view, a number of comparisons between overlapping aspects of these areas of scholarship would prove useful to their students' work. In retrospect, I should not have been surprised by this, for a quick survey of syllabi in many a

general philosophy of science course reveals subject matters shared with, and deeply informed by historical connections to, some of the central preoccupations of ancient philosophy: the natures of (scientific) categories of things and their properties; the character of laws of nature and the status of modal claims more generally; relations between entities at different “levels” of description and questions of reduction and emergence; and so on. The mystery, on reflection, was not much of a mystery after all.

The issues I have just now gestured towards as interesting points of contact between ancient philosophy and contemporary philosophy of science are metaphysical issues, and it is here that one might most readily expect a number of connections. It was not until later that I wondered whether a similarly fruitful overlap might exist in relation to certain epistemological issues. Two thoughts in particular struck me as keystones: one concerning ancient arguments about knowledge and work in contemporary analytic epistemology; and another concerning ancient discussions of knowledge and contemporary epistemology of science. The first thought was that, beyond the observation that various skeptical arguments have echoed through the ages so as to produce analogues in contemporary epistemology, Pyrrhonian skepticism more specifically, with its talk of suspending judgment after constructing arguments on both sides of a question such that they have equal strength, has an echo in recent discussions of voluntarism in epistemology—that is, in discussions of whether doxastic states are sometimes, in some sense, “chosen.” The second thought was that ancient skeptical arguments more broadly have echoes in contemporary debates concerning epistemological interpretations of the sciences, where convictions regarding how the outputs of scientific practice constitute knowledge are contested.

In the spring of 2012, a workshop was held at the University of Notre Dame to shed some light on these and other possible connections between forms of ancient skepticism and current debates in epistemology, including the epistemology of science. The special issue before you is the result of a series of provocative discussions there, and much subsequent work since. While the resulting papers are fully independent and can each stand alone, they can also be read in a way that traces their original intent to the discussion of the workshop, as forming parts of a larger narrative arc. The collection begins with more general comparisons of the nature and scope of Pyrrhonian skepticism and skeptical challenges as they appear in contemporary epistemology, traveling through possible analogies and disanalogies that obtain between these philosophical contexts as regards the notion of voluntarism, before engaging with questions about whether Pyrrhonian skepticism is compatible with, or a useful lens through which to view, epistemological diagnoses of scientific knowledge

more specifically, such as forms of scientific realism and antirealism, and the current dialectic between positions of this sort. I will follow this arc through the papers comprising this special issue below, with a brief summary of their objectives and some of the issues they confront.

In “The Agrippan Problem, Then and Now,” Michael Williams focuses on what he calls “the Agrippan challenge,” *viz.* the celebrated skeptical arguments associated with the so-called modes of Agrippa, which play a key role in both Pyrrhonian philosophy and contemporary epistemology. In the treatment of Pyrrhonism given by Sextus Empiricus, all five of Agrippa’s modes, or argumentative strategies, play a role, but in the contemporary context, interest generally targets three of these modes in particular, often formulated as a trilemma: in reply to a request to justify one’s holding of a belief, one may answer but then find oneself challenged to produce ever further justifications, leading to an infinite regress; if one digs in at any given point, maintaining that a given reason for belief requires no further justification, one is charged with making an arbitrary or brute assumption; if instead one relies at some point on a reason already cited in such a chain of reasoning, the charge becomes one of reasoning in a circle. Williams’s primary goal is to investigate the consequences of the fact that, in his estimation, the Agrippan challenge is understood very differently in the ancient and contemporary philosophical contexts. In the latter, it has been received as a challenge to knowledge very generally, whereas in the former, its remit is significantly circumscribed.

According to Williams, the crux of the difference resides in the fact that Sextus was operating with a more restrictive understanding of “belief” than is presupposed in contemporary discussion. More specifically, Sextus holds belief to be relevant to the domain of theoretical matters, such as philosophy, whereas something other than belief in the modern sense—call it “assent”—is apropos of the sorts of practical matters that populate the domain of everyday life. In everyday life, appearances or sense-impressions serve as one criterion for assent, among others. Williams suggests that the most plausible reading of the Pyrrhonist’s attitude towards the content of such appearances is a form of metaphysical quietism, in which propositions are simply “taken at face value” in the absence of further philosophical probing, thus incurring no beliefs about “underlying realities” (*hypokeimena*). These contentions are helpful, I think, in bringing to light one of the two central themes to emerge in this collection: the idea that different doxastic attitudes may be appropriate to different domains, however the domains are demarcated. This is a natural reading, for example, of certain antirealist philosophies of science. Williams argues to the effect that, ultimately, Sextus is unsuccessful in maintaining *his* dichotomy may thus have resonance in these later debates.

Casey Perin introduces the second major theme of the collection—the idea that doxastic states concerning theoretical or philosophical matters may be subject to a form of voluntarism—in his contribution entitled “Skepticism, Suspension of Judgment, and Norms for Belief.” The central focus here is the process by which, according to Sextus, the Pyrrhonian skeptic arrives at a suspension of judgment regarding all such matters, *viz.* the process of constructing arguments on both (or all) sides of a question in such a way that they are equipollent, or equally persuasive. Perin argues that while it is implausible that the skeptic suspends judgment voluntarily, or at will, it may well be plausible that she voluntarily commits to a process whereby equipollent standoffs are generated, thus exercising a form of “indirect or managerial control” over the suspension of judgment. The crucial distinction here is that between suspending judgment on the one hand, and *bringing oneself* to suspend judgment on the other; if one could do the former at will, there would be no need for the latter. The idea that voluntary commitments may not only inform or determine the nature of a process that ultimately results in a doxastic state, but may, thereby, determine which doxastic state results, is a theme taken up in subsequent papers.

On Perin’s rendering, it is unclear whether the epistemological picture that Sextus paints is tenable, for the distinction between the process of constructing equipollent conflicts and the following suspension of judgment arguably generates an incoherence in the picture overall. The incoherence stems from the differential applicability of two distinct norms of belief: a norm of truth, an epistemic norm, according to which one should believe a proposition only if it is true; and a norm of utility, a pragmatic norm, according to which one should believe a proposition only if it promotes tranquility. According to Perin, Sextus’s Pyrrhonian skeptic studies philosophy as a means to developing the ability to construct equipollent conflicts, which is itself a means to such construction, which is a means to suspension of judgment, which then produces tranquility. This iterated means-end reasoning exemplifies the pragmatic norm, and fits neatly with the idea that one may choose to act in a way that satisfies it. But elsewhere Sextus is clear that pragmatic reasons cannot serve as reasons for the suspension of judgment. There are potential morals here for current debates between scientific realists and antirealists, which likewise feature juxtapositions of epistemic and pragmatic considerations in connection with suspension of belief.

In his paper “On Pyrrhonism, Stances, and Believing What You Want,” Richard Bett initially flips the perspective from a consideration of whether the idea of voluntarism may inform our understanding of Pyrrhonian skepticism, to a consideration of whether Pyrrhonian skepticism may inform a conception

of voluntarism associated with current debates in the philosophy of science. These debates focus on the notion of epistemic stances, which comprise the sorts of attitudes, commitments, and methodologies an agent brings to bear in inquiry that determine how the agent goes about generating factual beliefs. Stances are thus prior to and distinct from the sorts of beliefs one may have about, say, various aspects of the world described by the sciences. One way to distinguish between those who interpret scientific knowledge in realist and antirealist fashions is by means of the different stances they adopt, and recent discussion has entertained the question of whether different stances, though conflicting, may nonetheless be rationally permissible, thus suggesting a form of voluntarism regarding their adoption and thereby, perhaps, the beliefs that eventuate. Bett examines the issue of whether Pyrrhonism, with its talk of opposed arguments of “equal strength,” can offer any insight into the notion of opposed stances of “equal rationality.”

On the whole, as one might expect, the analogies between these two philosophical contexts, addressed to different epistemological problematics, are often negative in the details, but suggestive parallels do emerge. Regarding the contexts, Bett suggests that at least part of the contemporary realist stance is widely assumed in the ancient world, if not reflectively, in that there is widespread, implicit adoption of “realist presuppositions about what success in science would involve,” *viz.* “it would be to grasp the nature of various unobservables” and thus explain the phenomena of our experience in terms of the underlying natures of things. The partiality of the overlap seems evident, however, in the attitudes of ancient skeptics generally towards the holding of such beliefs. As an aside, this raises an interesting question about whether realism is better conceived purely in terms of the aim of seeking certain kinds of truths, as opposed to the requirement that one believe at least some of the outputs of such seeking (this question will return momentarily). The observation that a kind of realist stance was widely shared diminishes the possible relevance of stance voluntarism in the ancient context, and of course one may simply reject science entirely, as ancient Empiricist physicians (including Sextus, presumably) were wont to do, but this leaves open the possibility of applying the Pyrrhonist’s skeptical method to contemporary epistemic stances.

The last two papers of the collection—“Realism and Anti-Realism about Science: A Pyrrhonian Stance,” by Otávio Bueno, and “Suspension of Belief and Epistemologies of Science,” by Anjan Chakravartty—aim to take seriously some of the suggestive parallels intimated above and expose them to critical scrutiny. Bueno’s effort is framed by the question of whether the Pyrrhonist can be a realist or an antirealist concerning scientific knowledge, in the modern senses of these terms. His answer, provocatively, is that if these positions

are conceived as stances, then the answer is ‘yes’—in *both* cases. The paper begins by considering scenarios in which no one answer to a philosophical question, among competing options, seems forced on the basis of the available data and arguments. In some such cases, Bueno suggests, one may speak of having the choice to go one way or another, even if some theoretical beliefs seem “forced” on particular agents by strongly held intuitions. Admittedly, the Pyrrhonian outlook seems different: the Pyrrhonist cannot be a voluntarist regarding the truth or falsity of voluntarism, for instance, understood as an epistemological thesis. Nevertheless, she *may* engage in “voluntary agnosticism,” in the form of suspension of judgment, insofar as she voluntarily seeks to construct equipollent oppositions in arguments for and against a given thesis.

The key to Pyrrhonism being compatible with both scientific realism and antirealism, on Bueno’s view, is a particular reading of the latter positions in non-dogmatic terms, *viz.* excluding the endorsement of beliefs about unobservable scientific entities and processes (*inter alia*) typical of realism, and beliefs concerning our inability to know about such things typical of antirealism. On this reading, aspects of realist and antirealist stances are shared with Pyrrhonism, such as the aim of seeking theoretical truths, characteristic of realism, and a critical mode of engagement with scientific claims, characteristic of antirealism. Chakravartty, on the other hand, brings a more traditional understanding of realism and antirealism to bear in thinking about, not whether these positions are compatible with Pyrrhonian skepticism, but whether Pyrrhonism furnishes insight into debates between realists and antirealists themselves. He argues that an understanding of the differences in epistemic stance held by these interlocutors yields an epistemological diagnosis of why some agents recognize particular domains of inquiry as fitting for belief where others do not. The reasons commonly given for suspending belief in some domains are familiar from ancient skepticism. And if one accepts, as Chakravartty argues we should, a robust voluntarism about stances, something akin to Pyrrhonian *ataraxia* or tranquility should follow, regarding the very nature of disputes about realism.

Here the arc of the collection, via considerations of the nature of ancient skepticism and analogies and disanalogies to contemporary discussions of the tenability of epistemological voluntarism, terminates in considerations of how interpretations of scientific knowledge may or may not be characterized in a Pyrrhonian way today. In the spirit of the enterprise, we hope that these essays illustrate some of the benefits of reaching across subdisciplines and, indeed, in this case, thousands of years of enduring questions of philosophy.

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