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Outlines of Pyrrhonism

Sextus Empiricus
(Mary Mills Patrick, tr.)

BOOK I

CHAPTER I.

The Principal Differences between Philosophers.

¹ It is probable that those who seek after anything whatever, will either find it as they continue the search, will deny that it can be found and confess it to be out of reach, or will go on seeking it. ² Some have said, accordingly, in regard to the things sought in philosophy, that they have found the truth, while others have declared it impossible to find, and still others continue to seek it. Those who think that they have found it are those who are especially called Dogmatics, as for example, the Schools of Aristotle and Epicurus, the Stoics and some others. ³ Those who have declared it impossible to find are Clitomachus, Carneades, with their respective followers, and other Academicians. Those who still seek it are the Sceptics. ⁴ It appears therefore, reasonable to conclude that the three principal kinds of philosophy are the Dogmatic, the Academic, and the Sceptic. Others may suitably treat of the other Schools, but as for the Sceptical School, we shall now give an outline of it, remarking in advance that in respect to nothing that will be said do we speak positively, that it must be absolutely so, but we shall state each thing historically as it now appears to us.

CHAPTER II.

Ways of Treating Scepticism.

⁵ One way of treating the Sceptical philosophy is called general, and the other special. The general method is that by which we set forth the character of Scepticism, declaring what its idea is, what its principles are, its mode of reasoning, its criterion, and its aim. It presents also, the aspects of doubt, *οἱ τρόποι τῆς ἐποχῆς*, and the way in which we should understand the Sceptical formulae, and the distinction between Scepticism and the related Schools of philosophy. ⁶ The special method, on the contrary, is that by which we speak against each part of so-called philosophy. Let us then treat Scepticism at first in the general way, beginning our delineation with the nomenclature of the Sceptical School.

CHAPTER III.

The Nomenclature of Scepticism.

⁷ The Sceptical School is also called the “Seeking School,” from its spirit of research and examination; the “Suspending School,” from the condition of mind in which one is left after the search, in regard to the things that he has examined; and the “Doubting School,” either because, as some say, the Sceptics doubt and are seeking in regard to everything, or because they never know whether to deny or affirm. It is also called the Pyrrhonian School, because Pyrrho appears to us the best representative of Scepticism, and is more prominent than all who before him occupied themselves with it.

CHAPTER IV.

What is Scepticism?

⁸ The *δύναμις* of the Sceptical School is to place the phenomenal in opposition to the intellectual “in any way whatever,” and thus through the equilibrium of the reasons and things (*ἰσοσθένεια τῶν λόγων*) opposed to each other, to reach, first the state of suspension of judgment, *ἐποχή*, and afterwards that of imperturbability, *ἀταραξία*. ⁹ We do not use the word *δύναμις* in any unusual sense, but simply, meaning the force of the system. By the phenomenal, we understand the sensible, hence we place the intellectual in opposition to it. The phrase “in any way whatever,” may refer to the word *δύναμις* in order that we may understand that word in a simple sense as we said, or it may refer to the placing the phenomenal and intellectual in opposition. For we place these in opposition to each other in a variety of ways, the phenomenal to the phenomenal, and the intellectual to the intellectual, or reciprocally, and we say “in any way whatever,” in order that all methods of opposition may be included. Or “in any way whatever” may refer to the phenomenal and the intellectual, so that we need not ask how does the phenomenal appear, or how are the thoughts conceived, but that we may understand these things in a simple sense. ¹⁰ By “reasons opposed to each other,” we do not by any means understand that they deny or affirm anything, but simply that they offset each other. By equilibrium, we mean equality in regard to trustworthiness and untrustworthiness, so that of the reasons that are placed in opposition to each other, one should not excel another in trustworthiness. *ἐποχή* is a holding back of the opinion, in consequence of which we neither deny nor affirm anything. *ἀταραξία* is repose and tranquillity of soul. We shall explain how *ἀταραξία* accompanies *ἐποχή* when we speak of the aim.

CHAPTER V.

The Sceptic.

¹¹ What is meant by a Pyrrhonian philosopher can be understood from the idea of the Sceptical School. He is a Pyrrhonian, namely, who identifies himself with this system.

CHAPTER VI.

The Origin of Scepticism.

¹² Scepticism arose in the beginning from the hope of attaining ἀταραξία; for men of the greatest talent were perplexed by the contradiction of things, and being at a loss what to believe, began to question what things are true, and what false, hoping to attain ἀταραξία as a result of the decision. The fundamental principle of the Sceptical system is especially this, namely, to oppose every argument by one of equal weight, for it seems to us that in this way we finally reach the position where we have no dogmas.

CHAPTER VII.

Does the Sceptic Dogmatise?

¹³ We say that the Sceptic does not dogmatise. We do not say this, meaning by the word dogma the popular assent to certain things rather than others (for the Sceptic does assent to feelings that are a necessary result of sensation, as for example, when he is warm or cold, he cannot say that he thinks he is not warm or cold), but we say this, meaning by dogma the acceptance of any opinion in regard to the unknown things investigated by science. For the Pyrrhonian assents to nothing that is unknown. ¹⁴ Furthermore, he does not dogmatise even when he utters the Sceptical formulae in regard to things that are unknown, such as “Nothing more,” or “I decide nothing,” or any of the others about which we shall speak later. For the one who dogmatises regards the thing about which he is said to dogmatise, as existing in itself; the Sceptic does not however regard these formulae as having an absolute existence, for he assumes that the saying “All is false,” includes itself with other things as false, and likewise the saying “Nothing is true”; in the same way “Nothing more,” states that together with other things it itself is nothing more, and cancels itself therefore, as well as other things. We say the same also in regard to the other Sceptical expressions. ¹⁵ In short, if he who dogmatises, assumes as existing in itself that about which he dogmatises, the Sceptic, on the contrary, expresses his sayings in such a way that they are understood to be themselves included, and it cannot be said that he dogmatises in saying these things. The principal thing in uttering these formulae is that he says what appears to him, and communicates his own feelings

in an unprejudiced way, without asserting anything in regard to external objects.

CHAPTER VIII.

Is Scepticism a Sect?

¹⁶ We respond in a similar way if we are asked whether Scepticism is a sect or not. If the word sect is defined as meaning a body of persons who hold dogmas which are in conformity with each other, and also with phenomena, and dogma means an assent to anything that is unknown, then we reply that we have no sect. ¹⁷ If, however, one means by sect, a school which follows a certain line of reasoning based on phenomena, and that reasoning shows how it is possible to apparently live rightly, not understanding “rightly” as referring to virtue only, but in a broader sense; if, also, it leads one to be able to suspend the judgment, then we reply that we have a sect. For we follow a certain kind of reasoning which is based upon phenomena, and which shows us how to live according to the habits, laws, and teachings of the fatherland, and our own feelings.

CHAPTER IX.

Does the Sceptic Study Natural Science?

¹⁸ We reply similarly also to the question whether the Sceptic should study natural science. For we do not study natural science in order to express ourselves with confidence regarding any of the dogmas that it teaches, but we take it up in order to be able to meet every argument by one of equal weight, and also for the sake of *ἀταραξία*. In the same way we study the logical and ethical part of so-called philosophy.

CHAPTER X.

Do the Sceptics deny Phenomena?

¹⁹ Those who say that the Sceptics deny phenomena appear to me to be in ignorance of our teachings. For as we said before, we do not deny the sensations which we think we have, and which lead us to assent involuntarily to them, and these are the phenomena. When, however, we ask whether the object is such as it appears to be, while we concede that it appears so and so, we question, not the phenomenon, but in regard to that which is asserted of the phenomenon, and that is different from doubting the phenomenon itself. ²⁰ For example, it appears to us that honey is sweet. This we concede, for we experience sweetness through sensation. We doubt, however, whether it is sweet by reason of its essence, which is not a question of the phenomenon, but of that which is asserted of the phenomenon. Should we, however, argue directly against the

phenomena, it is not with the intention of denying their existence, but to show the rashness of the Dogmatics. For if reasoning is such a deceiver that it well nigh snatches away the phenomena from before your eyes, how should we not distrust it in regard to things that are unknown, so as not to rashly follow it?

CHAPTER XI.

The Criterion of Scepticism.

²¹ It is evident that we pay careful attention to phenomena from what we say about the criterion of the Sceptical School. The word criterion is used in two ways. First, it is understood as a proof of existence or non-existence, in regard to which we shall speak in the opposing argument. Secondly, when it refers to action, meaning the criterion to which we give heed in life, in doing some things and refraining from doing others, and it is about this that we shall now speak. ²² We say, consequently, that the criterion of the Sceptical School is the phenomenon, and in calling it so, we mean the idea of it. It cannot be doubted, as it is based upon susceptibility and involuntary feeling. Hence no one doubts, perhaps, that an object appears so and so, but one questions if it is as it appears. ²³ Therefore, as we cannot be entirely inactive as regards the observances of daily life, we live by giving heed to phenomena, and in an unprejudiced way. But this observance of what pertains to the daily life, appears to be of four different kinds. Sometimes it is directed by the guidance of nature, sometimes by the necessity of the feelings, sometimes by the tradition of laws and of customs, and sometimes by the teaching of the arts. ²⁴ It is directed by the guidance of nature, for by nature we are capable of sensation and thought; by the necessity of the feelings, for hunger leads us to food, and thirst to drink; by the traditions of laws and customs, for according to them we consider piety a good in daily life, and impiety an evil; by the teaching of the arts, for we are not inactive in the arts we undertake. We say all these things, however, without expressing a decided opinion.

CHAPTER XII.

What is the aim of Scepticism?

²⁵ It follows naturally in order to treat of the aim of the Sceptical School. An aim is that for which as an end all things are done or thought, itself depending on nothing, or in other words, it is the ultimatum of things to be desired. We say, then, that the aim of the Sceptic is *ἀταραξία* in those things which pertain to the opinion, and moderation in the things that life imposes. ²⁶ For as soon as he began to philosophise he wished to discriminate between ideas, and to understand which are true and which are false, in order to attain

ἀταραξία. He met, however, with contradictions of equal weight, and, being unable to judge, he withheld his opinion; and while his judgment was in suspension *ἀταραξία* followed, as if by chance, in regard to matters of opinion. ²⁷ For he who is of the opinion that anything is either good or bad by nature is always troubled, and when he does not possess those things that seem to him good he thinks that he is tortured by the things which are by nature bad, and pursues those that he thinks to be good. Having acquired them, however, he falls into greater perturbation, because he is excited beyond reason and without measure from fear of a change, and he does everything in his power to retain the things that seem to him good. ²⁸ But he who is undecided, on the contrary, regarding things that are good and bad by nature, neither seeks nor avoids anything eagerly, and is therefore in a state of *ἀταραξία*. For that which is related of Apelles the painter happened to the Sceptic. It is said that as he was once painting a horse he wished to represent the foam of his mouth in the picture, but he could not succeed in doing so, and he gave it up and threw the sponge at the picture with which he had wiped the colors from the painting. As soon, however, as it touched the picture it produced a good copy of the foam. ²⁹ The Sceptics likewise hoped to gain *ἀταραξία* by forming judgments in regard to the anomaly between phenomena and the things of thought, but they were unable to do this, and so they suspended their judgment; and while their judgment was in suspension *ἀταραξία* followed, as if by chance, as the shadow follows a body. Nevertheless, we do not consider the Sceptic wholly undisturbed, but he is disturbed by some things that are inevitable. We confess that sometimes he is cold and thirsty, and that he suffers in such ways. ³⁰ But in these things even the ignorant are beset in two ways, from the feelings themselves, and not less also from the fact that they think these conditions are bad by nature. The Sceptic, however, escapes more easily, as he rejects the opinion that anything is in itself bad by nature. Therefore we say that the aim of the Sceptic is *ἀταραξία* in matters of opinion, and moderation of feeling in those things that are inevitable. Some notable Sceptics have added also suspension of judgment in investigation.

CHAPTER XIII.

The General Method of Scepticism.

³¹ Since we have said that *ἀταραξία* follows the suspension of judgment in regard to everything, it behooves us to explain how the suspension of judgment takes place. Speaking in general it takes place through placing things in opposition to each other. We either place phenomena in opposition to phenomena, or the intellectual in opposition to the intellectual, or reciprocally. ³² For example, we place

phenomena in opposition to phenomena when we say that this tower appears round from a distance but square near by; the intellectual in opposition to the intellectual, when to the one who from the order of the heavens builds a tower of reasoning to prove that a providence exists, we oppose the fact that adversity often falls to the good and prosperity to the evil, and that therefore we draw the conclusion that there is no providence.³³ The intellectual is placed in opposition to phenomena, as when Anaxagoras opposed the fact that snow is white, by saying that snow is frozen water, and, as water is black, snow must also be black. Likewise we sometimes place the present in opposition to the present, similarly to the above-mentioned cases, and sometimes also the present in opposition to the past or the future. As for example, when someone proposes an argument to us that we cannot refute,³⁴ we say to him, “Before the founder of the sect to which you belong was born, the argument which you propose in accordance with it had not appeared as a valid argument, but was dormant in nature, so in the same way it is possible that its refutation also exists in nature, but has not yet appeared to us, so that it is not at all necessary for us to agree with an argument that now seems to be strong.”³⁵ In order to make it clearer to us what we mean by these oppositions, I will proceed to give the Tropes (τρόποι), through which the suspension of judgment is produced, without asserting anything about their meaning or their number, because they may be unsound, or there may be more than I shall enumerate.

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