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Outlines of Pyrrhonism

Sextus Empiricus
(Mary Mills Patrick, tr.)

BOOK I

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CHAPTER XXIX.

*In what does the Sceptical School differ from the Philosophy of
Heraclitus?*

²¹⁰ Now that this school differs from ours is evident, for Heraclitus expresses himself about many unknown things dogmatically, which we do not, as has been said. Aenesidemus and his followers said that the Sceptical School is the way to the philosophy of Heraclitus. They gave as a reason for this that the statement that contradictory predicates appear to be applicable to the same thing, leads the way to the statement that contradictory predicates are in reality applicable to the same thing; and as the Sceptics say that contradictory predicates appear to be applicable to the same thing, the Heraclitans proceed from this to the doctrine that such predicates are in reality applicable. We reply to this that the statement that contradictory predicates appear to be applicable to the same thing is not a dogma of the Sceptics, but is a fact that presents itself not only to the Sceptics, but to other philosophers, and to all men. ²¹¹ No one, for instance, would venture to say that honey does not taste sweet to those in health, and bitter to those who have the jaundice, so that the Heraclitans start from a preconception common to all men, as do we also, and perhaps the other schools of philosophy likewise. If, however, they had attributed the origin of the statement that contradictory predicates are present in the same thing to any of the Sceptical teachings, as, for example, to the formula "Every thing is incomprehensible," or "I determine nothing," or any of the other similar ones, it may be that which they say would follow; but since they start from that which is a common experience, not only to us, but to other philosophers, and in life, why should one say that our school is a path to the philosophy of Heraclitus more than any of the other schools of philosophy, or than life itself, as we all make use of the same subject matter? ²¹² On the other hand, the Sceptical School may not only fail to help towards the knowledge of the philosophy of Heraclitus, but may even hinder it! For the Sceptic attacks all the dogmas of Heraclitus as having been rashly given, and opposes on the one hand the doctrine of conflagration, and on the

other, the doctrine that contradictory predicates in reality apply to the same thing, and in regard to every dogma of Heraclitus he scorns his dogmatic rashness, and then, in the manner that I have before referred to, adduces the formulae “I do not understand” and “I determine nothing,” which conflict with the Heraclitan doctrines. It is absurd to say that this conflicting school is a path to the very sect with which it conflicts. It is then absurd to say that the Sceptical School is a path to the philosophy of Heraclitus.

CHAPTER XXX.

In what does the Sceptical School differ from the Philosophy of Democritus?

²¹³ The philosophy of Democritus is also said to have community with Scepticism, because it seems to use the same matter that we do. For, from the fact that honey seems sweet to some and bitter to others, Democritus reasons, it is said, that honey is neither sweet nor bitter, and therefore he accords with the formula “No more,” which is a formula of the Sceptics. But the Sceptics and the Democritans use the formula “No more” differently from each other, for they emphasise the negation in the expression, but we, the not knowing whether both of the phenomena exist or neither one, ²¹⁴ and so we differ in this respect. The distinction, however, becomes most evident when Democritus says that atoms and empty space are real, for by real he means existing in reality. Now, although he begins with the anomaly in phenomena, yet, since he says that atoms and empty space really exist, it is superfluous, I think, even to say that he differs from us.

CHAPTER XXXI.

In what does Scepticism differ from the Cyrenaic Philosophy?

²¹⁵ Some say that the Cyrenaic School is the same as the Sceptical, because that school also claims to comprehend only conditions of mind. It differs, however, from it, because, while the former makes pleasure and the gentle motion of the flesh its aim, we make *ἀταραξία* ours, and this is opposed to the aim of their school. For whether pleasure is present or not, confusion awaits him who maintains that pleasure is an aim, as I have shown in what I said about the aim. And then, in addition, we suspend our judgment as far as the reasoning with regard to external objects is concerned, but the Cyrenaics pronounce the nature of these inscrutable.

CHAPTER XXXII.

In what does Scepticism differ from the Philosophy of Protagoras?

²¹⁶ Protagoras makes man the measure of all things, of things that are that they are, and things that are not that they are not, meaning by

measure, criterion, and by things, events, that is to say really, man is the criterion for all events, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not. And for that reason he accepts only the phenomena that appear to each man, and thus he introduces relation. ²¹⁷ Therefore he seems to have community with the Pyrrhoneans. He differs, however, from them, and we shall see the difference after we have somewhat explained how things seemed to Protagoras. He says, for example, that matter is fluid, and as it flows, additions are constantly made in the place of that which is carried away; the perceptions also are arranged anew and changed, according to the age and according to other conditions of the body. ²¹⁸ He says also, that the reasons of all phenomena are present in matter, so that matter can be all that it appears to be to all men as far as its power is concerned. Men, however, apprehend differently at different times, according to the different conditions that they are in; for he that is in a natural condition will apprehend those qualities in matter that can appear to those who are in a natural condition, while on the contrary, those who are in an unnatural condition will apprehend those qualities that can appear to the abnormal. ²¹⁹ Furthermore, the same reasoning would hold true in regard to differences in age, to sleeping and waking, and each of the other different conditions. Therefore man becomes the criterion of things that are, for all things that appear to men exist for men, and those things that do not appear to any one among men do not exist. We see that he dogmatizes in saying that matter is fluid, and also in saying that the reasons for all phenomena have their foundation in matter, while these things are unknown, and to us are things regarding which we suspend our judgment.

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CHAPTER XXXIV.

Is Empiricism in Medicine the same as Scepticism?

²³⁶ Some say that the medical sect called Empiricism is the same as Scepticism. Yet the fact must be recognised, that even if Empiricism does maintain the impossibility of knowledge, it is neither Scepticism itself, nor would it suit the Sceptic to take that sect upon himself. He could rather, it seems to me, belong to the so-called Methodic School. ²³⁷ For this alone, of all the medical sects, does not seem to proceed rashly in regard to unknown things, and does not presume to say whether they are comprehensible or not, but is guided by phenomena, and receives from them the same help which they seem to give to the Sceptical system. For we have said in what has gone before, that the every-day life which the Sceptic lives is of four parts, depending on the guidance of nature, on the necessity of the feelings, on the traditions of laws and customs, and on the teaching of the arts. ²³⁸

Now as by necessity of the feelings the Sceptic is led by thirst to drink, and by hunger to food, and to supply similar needs in the same way, so also the physician of the Methodic School is led by the feelings to find suitable remedies; in constipation he produces a relaxation, as one takes refuge in the sun from the shrinking on account of intense cold; he is led by a flux to the stopping of it, as those in a hot bath who are dripping from a profuse perspiration and are relaxed, hasten to check it by going into the cold air. Moreover, it is evident that the Methodic physician forces those things which are of a foreign nature to adapt themselves to their own nature, as even the dog tries to get a sharp stick out that is thrust into him. ²³⁹ In order, however, that I should not overstep the outline character of this work by discussing details, I think that all the things that the Methodics have thus said can be classified as referring to the necessity of the feelings that are natural or those that are unnatural. Besides this, it is common to both schools to have no dogmas, and to use words loosely. ²⁴⁰ For as the Sceptic uses the formula "I determine nothing," and "I understand nothing," as we said above, so the Methodic also uses the expressions "Community," and "To go through," and other similar ones without over much care. In a similar way he uses the word "Indication" undogmatically, meaning that the symptoms of the patient either natural or unnatural, indicate the remedies that would be suitable, as we said in speaking of thirst, hunger, and other things. ²⁴¹ It will thus be seen that the Methodic School of medicine has a certain relationship to Scepticism which is closer than that of the other medical sects, speaking comparatively if not absolutely from these and similar tokens. Having said so much in reference to the schools that seem to closely resemble Scepticism, we conclude the general consideration of Scepticism and the First Book of the Sketches.