

## **SEXTUS EMPIRICUS AND THE MEDICAL SKEPTICISM**

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Skepticism is a Post-Classical, Hellenistic philosophy based on the criterion of life, experience and phenomenon, intending to provide a practical way of life as opposed to a purely theoretical or academic pursuit of dogmatic philosophy. The term "skeptic" is a derivative of the noun, *skepsis* (σκέψις), which means thought, examination, inquiry, consideration and investigation. Ancient skepticism may be defined as a philosophical way, characterized by persistent commitment to investigate the truth, having the tendency to find the opposites both of objects of experience and of objects of thought. Although there are skeptical elements in the doctrines of many Greek philosophers, the term skepticism was applied to members of Plato's Academy during its skeptical period.

The ancient skeptics, rejecting the dogmatism, pose constantly questions about knowledge and beliefs, suggesting that all arguments can be opposed by discovering strong arguments of equal persuasive force and philosophical validity, emphasizing the dynamic possibility of arriving at reasonable beliefs, by philosophical investigation and dialectics. The result of any proper investigation is that the thinkers either discover the object of search or confess it to be inapprehensible, persisting however in their investigation. According to Diogenes Laertius, Arcesilaus was "the first to argue on both sides of a question". He insisted that for every reasoning there is an equal and opposite reasoning, since the reality of things seems to be inaccessible to the human mind, and definite certitude would be impossible of attainment, in opposition to Dogmatists who believed that the truth is accessible and they have found it.

Sextus Empiricus, (160–210 AD) was a physician who belonged to the empiricists, a medical school that argued against rationalistic tendencies in medicine, which aimed to give etiological explanations as a basis for therapeutic approach. Inside the atmosphere of Hellenistic epistemology, which claimed that the main task of the scientific thought was to determine the criterion of truth, empiricists have dedicated themselves to observation, memory and experience. They endeavored to derive from observation and experience what seemed to be beneficial for the patients.

Sextus, whose writings are the main source of most of our knowledge of ancient skepticism, has lived presumably in Alexandria, Rome and Athens. He wrote some medical dissertations, which have been lost and three philosophical books, which survived but remained in obscurity until their rediscovery during the period of the Renaissance. Two of these works are grouped together under the general heading, ***Adversus Mathematicos***, containing arguments against the Logicians, the Physicists and the Ethicists. The third book is the ***Outlines of Pyrrhonism***, which provides an outline of Pyrrhonian skepticism, including also his own philosophical doctrines.

Sextus offers in his works a general overview of skepticism, describing skeptical investigation, suspension of judgment, skeptical dialog, language and practice. Sextus invokes also dogmatic ideas about the acquisition of reason. He insists that the skepticism does not accept or reject any impression and does not affirm or deny anything. Sextus says that appearances (phainomena, φαινόμενα) are the practical criterion of the skeptic approaching to the truth and by the continuous investigation the skeptic is prevented from inactivity (anenergêsia, ἀνεργησία). The only way to achieve wisdom is to suspend judgment, regarding everything, and never facing the risk of being wrong. Nature has equipped the human being with the capacity for perception, analysis of the phenomena, ability to settling what is true and what is false, thought and meditation. Man may use these capacities as well as intelligent thinking insofar as they don't lead him to dogmatism. A skeptic philosopher is always active because he uses his ability to think and investigate, which depends on the fact that he has acquired concepts as part of his growing up.

According to Sextus' doctrines, logic is based on phenomena and criteria. Sextus proposed several practical criteria, as laws and customs that the man can apply whenever he decides to suspend judgment on absolute truth.

Science is considered as being the main source of pure knowledge. However according to skeptical arguments science could not presume to provide the authoritative truth. The issues of the science must be understood from a dialectical perspective. For the thinker, it might be beneficial to expand science into some more ambiguous areas of experience, since whatever happens to be debatable concerns reality. The scientific methodology is characterized as a four-fold view consisting of (a) investigation, as starting point, (b) equipollence, a balance of all positive and negative aspects for a certain standpoint, (c) suspension of judgment and turn to practical criteria and (d) tranquility, real peace of mind, imperturbability. Reality can be questioned, debated, disagreed and has to be investigated. By contrast, appearance cannot be questioned, since it is clearly obvious.

In skeptical philosophy there are two fundamental questions: (a) whether there is anything good and bad by nature and (b) whether there is an art of life. Sextus Empiricus, although suspended judgment on absolute truth, he endeavored to find a proper way of talking about truth issues, elaborating various skeptical formulas for making a statement about truth, whenever he confronted with truth claims.

Any argument requires proof, which must be precisely proven and that leads no rarely to an infinite regression. The escape from infinite regression might happen by something unproven based on a hypothesis; otherwise thinking would be possible to fall into a vicious circle. Otherwise, the stronger the justification of some theory, the more impressive is its skeptical refutation. Arriving to a definite conclusion is not merely a matter of intellectual integrity or high education and wisdom, since it is mostly a matter of the nature of the problem. Thus, tranquility would come only by suspending judgment. Encountering disagreement, whenever several views appear to be of equal validity (*isostheneia* *ισοσθένεια*), and the skeptic philosophers, being unable to judge and decide accurately, should give up, in order to experience tranquility, peace of mind (*ataraxia*, *αταραξία*) which is the supreme task for the skeptics. In the field of morality Sextus Empiricus and the skeptics deny the existence of an absolute good but admit the potentiality for amelioration of the life, based on the proper evaluation of the experiences.

Sextus's doctrines have influenced the course of Western philosophy, especially the philosophy of the science and offer the substantial theoretical background for the evidence based medicine.