SCEPTICAL DOGMATA: 
OUTLINES OF PYRRHONISM I 13

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I.

One of the most vexed questions about ancient scepticism is whether ancient sceptics disavow all, or only some, beliefs. On what I shall call the No Belief View, sceptics claim to have no beliefs whatsoever. On what I shall call the Some Belief View, sceptics disavow only some beliefs. It is difficult to adjudicate this debate. One reason is the intractability of the texts. Another is that it is unclear precisely what question is being asked. Here it is useful to distinguish two questions:

1. Do sceptics disavow all, or only some, dogmata?2
2. Do they disavow all, or only some, beliefs, as we understand belief?

1 is an internal question: it asks what the sceptics say in their own words. 2 is an external question: it asks whether we should say that sceptics claim to have beliefs, given 'our' concept of belief. The answer to 1 is in a way easy: for in PH I 13, Sextus explicitly says that sceptics have dogmata. But this leaves unanswered a more difficult question: whether, in doing so, he means that sceptics have beliefs, as we might wish to understand belief. This leads to another difficult question: for there is no agreed concept of belief that 'we' all share: belief is understood in various ways. Accordingly, I proceed in two stages. First I say how I propose to understand belief here, and I contrast my understanding of belief with

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1 Note that my question is whether sceptics claim to have some, or no, beliefs. (There is evidently a difficulty in claiming to have no beliefs, but I shall not pursue that issue here.) I am not asking whether they in fact have some, or no, beliefs.


3 Similarly, in PH I 229-30, he says that there is a way or sense in which sceptics 'go along with' (peithesthai) various things: a different way or sense, according to Sextus, from that in which Academics go along with things. In M XI 118, he says that sceptics believe (doxazein) that nothing is good or bad by nature. M XI, however, may well be at odds with PH in various ways. I don't know of a place in PH where Sextus says that sceptics have doxai, though he several times says that they live adoxastōs: see n 65.
another one. I then ask whether, when Sextus says that sceptics have *dogmata*, he means that they have beliefs, as I shall understand belief here.\(^4\)

II.

Quite a lot of attention has been devoted to asking what knowledge is. But the notion of belief is often taken for granted, as though it raised no special difficulties. Richard Braithwaite, for example, says: ‘I intend to discuss a comparatively minor problem ... that of the analysis of the cognitive relations in which I can stand to propositions, and in particular the most practically important of them, the relation of believing’.\(^5\) Far from being ‘a comparatively minor problem’, however, the analysis of belief is both very important and very difficult. It would take us too far afield to provide a full discussion here. Instead, I shall focus on how Michael Frede and Myles Burnyeat understand belief; for they are among the main contributors to the debate between the Some Belief and the No Belief Views.\(^6\) I shall also say how I propose to use ‘belief’. Once we have fixed a sense of the term, we can ask whether Sextus accords sceptics beliefs in that sense.

According to Burnyeat, if A believes p, A takes p to be true.\(^7\) This view is hardly idiosyncratic. On the contrary, it is usually thought to be definitively

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\(^4\) My scope is therefore limited: I make no claims about whether non-Pyrrhonian sceptics claim to have beliefs; nor do I make any claims about Pyrrhonists other than Sextus, or even about Sextus outside of *PH* I 13 and some related passages, especially I 19-22 (which claim to elucidate I 13). My focus on Sextus is justified by the fact that he is our main source for Pyrrhonian scepticism. My focus on I 13 is justified by the fact that it is the only passage in which Sextus explicitly says that sceptics have *dogmata*, and explains what this means. Moreover, the early sections of *PH* I play a special role, since here Sextus explicitly says how all of what follows is to be understood. A fuller study would discuss not only more passages, but also Sextus’s use of *doxa* and its cognates, as well as of *peithesthai* and its cognates.


\(^6\) Note that my concern in this section is not their interpretation of Sextus, but how they understand belief in their own right. I consider their interpretation of Sextus later. See M. Frede, ‘The Skeptic’s Beliefs’, in his *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford, 1987), Ch. 10; and his ‘The Skeptic’s Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge’, also in his *Essays*, Ch. 11; M.F. Burnyeat, ‘Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?’, in M. Schofield, M. Burnyeat, and J. Barnes (eds.), *Doubt and Dogmatism: Essays in Hellenistic Epistemology* (Oxford, 1980), Ch. 2 (reprinted in M.F. Burnyeat, ed., *The Skeptical Tradition* [California, 1983], Ch. 6, latter pagination); and his ‘The Sceptic in His Place and Time’, in R. Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, and Q. Skinner (eds.), *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1984), Ch. 10.

\(^7\) See, for example, ‘Can’, p. 121. Burnyeat also thinks that beliefs are responsive to reason and that that is implied by the fact that belief aims at the truth (‘Can’, p. 137). This point, with which I agree, is well articulated by D. Velleman, in ‘The Possibility of Practical Reason’, *Ethics* 106 (1996), pp. 694-726, esp. pp. 706-7. I focus here on the issue of whether belief involves taking to be true; I shall not ask separately whether it involves being responsive to reason. On the view I favor, there is