Sextus Empiricus on Non-Assertion

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It is well-known from the writings of Sextus Empiricus that Sceptics, or at least those Pyrrhonian Sceptics for whom Sextus makes himself spokesman, took pains to mark themselves off from other philosophers by issuing disclaimers about their own philosophical utterances. The *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is liberally sprinkled with warnings of the following sort: the Sceptic does not “dogmatize” (δογματίζειν); he neither “affirms” (πιστεύει) nor “denies” (ἀμφιστεύει) anything; he adopts a stance of “non-assertion” (ἀφασία); he says only “what appears to himself” (τὸ ἑαυτῷ φαινόμενον); he does not “positively claim” (διαβεβαιώσθαι) that matters are as he says; and many of his utterances “cancel themselves” (αὐτὰ συμπεριφέρειν) along with all other statements.

In this paper I want to raise some questions about the force of these disclaimers, about their bearing on some typical Sceptical “claims” and arguments. At the outset I shall consider all the above sorts of expressions together as disclaimers of assertion, even though, as we shall see, Sextus himself puts them to work in interestingly different ways. I have the following kinds of questions in mind. To begin with, if we take these caveats seriously (and there seems little doubt that they were meant to be taken so), there is the rather large problem of how to construe the remainder of the Sceptic utterances to which they were plainly intended to apply. If the Sceptic is not making an assertion in uttering the words “it is day” when in fact it is day, “I am chilled” when a cool breeze begins to blow, or “there is no proof” after a long disquisition on the subject, what sorts of saying are these and how do they function for him? As for the disclaimers themselves, what is their status, and how are they related to first-order utterances? A problem closely tied in with these questions concerns the relation between the posture of non-assertion and the notion of “assent” (συγκατατίθεσθαι) to appearances (φαινόμενα), which must play

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1 See, for example, his discussion of the Sceptic φωναί (PH I 187, 191, 194-205).

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an equally important role in any discussion of Pyrrhonian Scepticism. How can the Sceptic assent to phenomena without committing himself to the truth of some assertion or other? Having proposed the apparent as a criterion for the conduct of life, can he avoid asserting something when he gives linguistic expression to the sensory and mental states that shape his actions? In the discussion that follows I look for an interpretation of non-assertion that meets these difficulties and finds support from the text of Sextus himself.

The various disclaimers of assertion entered by Sextus do not bar the Sceptic from engaging in discourse. He does not make an assertion (φάσις) merely in the act of “saying something” (λέγων τι) (PH I 197) or by speaking categorically, by saying something of the form “s is p”. Grammatical form is no sure indicator of the force of his speech. In fact the Sceptic’s manner of expression is often intentionally, even purposefully, unconventional. He is, at the very least, unmindful of the rules of ordinary discourse. So the distinction between assertion and non-assertion cannot be a function of grammatical form. How then does Sextus characterize it? In making an assertion (in the sense in which he wants to employ the term), Sextus says, one is using language to affirm or deny something, for instance, that it is (is not) day (PH I 192). Because the form of the Sceptic’s speech does not commit him to affirmation or negation, Sextus elaborates: assertion is speech uttered “dogmatically about what is non-evident” (τῶν κατὰ τὸ ἀδηλον δογματικῶς λεγομένων) (PH I 193). If the Sceptic makes no assertions, he does not “dogmatize”, does not assent to anything non-evident (PH I 13). Non-assertion, then, would appear to be an attitude (called a πάθος by Sextus at PH I 193) of caution on the part of the Sceptic in regard to the import of what he says. While the statements of other philosophers are meant to affirm or deny (with or without qualification) that something is the case (is true) (ὡς ὑπάρχων), the Sceptic construes his own pronouncements, along with all others, as “no more true than false” (PH I 14-15, 200, 206-208).2

The interpretation I propose to defend is that to assent to the non-evident is merely to claim that something is the case (is true). If non-assertion pertains to the import of the Sceptic utterances, I am therefore committed to saying that his speech allegedly makes no claims about what

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2 The reasons why Sceptic and dogmatic utterances are “no more” true than false, however, are not the same. As we shall see, the Sceptic’s speech properly construed has no truth value. The dogmatist’s assertions have a truth value but cannot be established as true or false.