

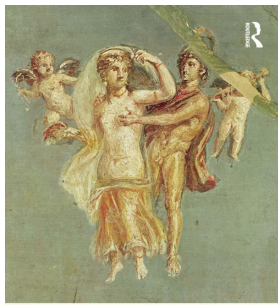
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SEXTUS EMPIRICUS

Richard Bett

Virtually nothing is known about the life of Sextus Empiricus. He was a doctor and, as his name implies, a member of the Empiric school of medicine. He probably lived in the second century CE. His importance in the history of philosophy lies in the fact that he is the only ancient Greek sceptic whose complete works survive. Specifically, he belonged to the Pyrrhonist sceptical tradition, taking its inspiration from Pyrrho of Elis (c.360–c.270 BCE), but organized as a systematic philosophical outlook in the early first century BCE by Aenesidemus of Cnossos. Sextus' surviving works are as follows: (i) *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (hereafter *PH*, the initials of the title in Greek),¹ which offers a general account of scepticism in the first book and, in the remaining two books, a critical assessment of non-sceptics' views in logic, physics and ethics, the standard areas of philosophy in the Hellenistic period; (ii) a work in six books criticizing the pretensions to theoretical knowledge by experts in various specialized fields such as rhetoric, mathematics and astrology, called *Against the Professors* (*Adversus mathematicos* in Latin, hence the standard abbreviation *M*); (iii) an incomplete work that originally covered the same ground as *PH*, but at much greater length; the surviving parts are *Against the Logicians* in two books, *Against the Physicists* in two books and *Against the Ethicists* in one book.² Sextus' own title for this work is *Skeptika Hupomnēmata* (Sceptical treatises). However, owing to a now unaccountable error in the manuscript tradition, these five surviving books were taken to be a continuation of the six-book work on specialized fields; as a result, the logical books are known by the abbreviation *M* 7–8, the physical part by *M* 9–10 and the ethical part by *M* 11. For the subject of religion only *PH* and parts of the incomplete work are relevant.

1. The best translation of this work bears the title *Outlines of Scepticism* (2000), but this is a replacement, not a translation, of the original title.

2. *Against the Physicists* is available in English only in the antiquated and not wholly reliable Bury translation (1936). My more recent translations of *Against the Logicians* and *Against the Ethicists* are available (2005 and 1997, respectively).

Sextus' usual method is to generate suspension of judgement from the conflicting arguments and opinions on any given topic. The arguments and opinions he employs for this purpose typically include those of the people he calls the dogmatists: that is, the believers in positive philosophical doctrines. They also very often include critiques of these, originating either from rival dogmatists or from the sceptics themselves. But even arguments generated by the sceptics are not arguments that the sceptic endorses; rather, they are part of the sceptic's means to a further end. The sceptic's trick, as Sextus presents it – what he calls the sceptic's "ability" (*dunamis*; *PH* 1.8) – consists in setting out these incompatible ideas in such a way that they exhibit the feature of *isostheneia*, 'equal strength'. For two or more positions to be of 'equal strength' is for the person contemplating them to be no more inclined towards any one of them than any other; in other words, it is a psychological notion rather than a logical one. The effect of this lack of inclination, according to Sextus, is that one suspends judgement about the correctness of any of the positions in question. Again, this is not a matter of what one is *rationaly required* to do – for that too would involve taking a definite position, albeit at a meta-level, and definite positions are what the sceptics avoid – but simply of what *happens* to one in the situation the sceptic has devised. And suspension of judgement, in turn, is supposed to yield *ataraxia*, "freedom from worry": the same goal that some dogmatists, most notably the Epicureans, claimed to achieve by the discovery of the truth. Scepticism, then, is not a purely intellectual exercise, but has an important practical effect. Indeed, like other philosophies of the time, it can be described as a *way of life*.

This, of course, raises the question how, more specifically, one is supposed to live as a sceptic. The short answer is that one follows the appearances: that is, one acts in light of the way things appear, while taking no stand on how they really are. One of the most perplexing questions about Sextus' treatment of the topic of religion is how this practical stance is supposed to apply in this case; Sextus is clear that it does apply, but it is difficult to make sense of what he says.

Discussions of religious matters, and of God or the gods, appear in Sextus' treatments of both physics and ethics.³ In the case of physics it appears he was not the first in the Pyrrhonist tradition. According to a summary of the lost work *Pyrrhonist Discourses* by Sextus' predecessor Aenesidemus, gods figured among the topics discussed concerning the cosmos and the nature of things (Photius, *Bibliotheca* (Library) 170a15–17, trans. in Long & Sedley 1987: 72L3); and this is not surprising, since the dogmatists did the same thing, back to the very beginning of Greek philosophy. In any case, Sextus deals with the conception and the existence of God in the physical section of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*PH* 3.2–12) and also, at much greater length, in *Against the Physicists* (*M* 9.13–194). In addition,

3. As often in Greek thought, the question of the *number* of divinities has, from our perspective, surprisingly little importance; and, following Sextus, I shall freely switch between singular and plural formulations.

religious customs and questions of what is pious figure in the ethical section of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (*PH* 3.198–234), and in one of the Modes, or standardized forms of sceptical argumentation, that deals with similar issues (*PH* 1.145–62). I begin by discussing these passages in more detail; I then address the question of religion's role in the sceptic's own life.

DETAILS OF THE TEXTS ON RELIGION

The passage in the physical section of *PH* 3 begins (after a prefatory remark to which I shall return) by arguing that there is no clear conception of God. Different dogmatic philosophers have incompatible conceptions of God, and their dispute about this proceeds “undecidably” (*anepikritōs*; 3). And their attempts to convey a clear conception by appealing to standard ideas of God's indestructibility and blessedness do not improve the situation (4–5). But then, in a common argumentative move, Sextus continues by saying that even if God *is* conceivable, we must suspend judgement about the *existence* of the divine, at least, “as far as the dogmatists are concerned” (6; another point to which I shall return).⁴ Again, this is because of the ‘undecidable dispute’ among the dogmatists about what God is really like, a dispute that would not occur if the divine was a matter of plain experience. The only way in which we could move beyond this impasse would be if a proof for the existence of God could be devised, but such a proof is unavailable (7–9): again, a very common motif in Sextus. Finally (9–12), Sextus exploits some well-known difficulties in the notion of divine providence to argue that a firm assertion of the existence of God is necessarily impious, because the God asserted to exist must be either a cause of bad, as well as of good, or lacking in power. The exact purpose of this last argument is not absolutely clear. It might be seen as an argument for a kind of self-refutation on the part of the dogmatists. Alternatively, it might be seen as one side of a pair of opposed arguments about providence, the goal again being suspension of judgement, and the unexpressed other side being a positive conception of God's providence, and of the piety of those who profess it (the Stoics being the most obvious source); this type of approach, too, is common in Sextus, especially when the existence of the unmentioned arguments on the other side is obvious.

The much longer discussion in *Against the Physicists* differs from this in certain ways. But it too begins with a section on the conception of God (*M* 9.14–48) – in this case, on competing explanations of how the conception of God has arisen, all of which are shown to fail – and it then addresses the existence of God (49–194), offering a number of arguments for and against, the inevitable result being suspension of judgement (191). Here, then, the ‘undecidable dispute’ about this question

4. All translations are my own.

is not merely asserted, but illustrated in some detail. There are some unclarities of structure, but the main outline of the discussion conforms to the pattern sketched in my introduction.

The passages relating to religion in the ethical sections of Sextus' work are rather different. Much of the ethical section of *PH* 3 is devoted to producing suspension of judgement about whether anything is by nature good or bad. This is accomplished partly by abstract arguments concerning what it would take for something to be by nature good or bad. But Sextus also decides to deal:

more specifically with the suppositions about what is shameful and what is not, what is prohibited [*athesmōn*, i.e. contrary to *thesmos*, which regularly, although not always, refers to divine law] and not such, laws and customs, piety towards the gods, reverence for the departed, and the like. (198)

There follows a large number of examples of inconsistencies, mainly cultural but also involving philosophical positions, in ethical and religious belief and practice (199–234). The same kinds of subject matter, both religious and ethical, are discussed more briefly and less systematically in the last of the Ten Modes in *PH* 1 (145–63); and here again the result is that we must suspend judgement about the nature of things in these areas.

How exactly are the inconsistencies supposed to yield this suspension of judgement? The answer might seem obvious. One suspends judgement because the conflicts concerning what is truly pious, or about what the gods are really like, are undecidable; this is the typical sceptical approach that I have talked about so far. And there is certainly support for this in the passages currently under examination. The tenth Mode speaks constantly of “opposing” (*antitithesthai*) the various different practices and beliefs being considered. This fits with Sextus' initial characterization of scepticism in general as an “oppositional ability” (*dunamis antithetikē*; *PH* 1.8). In the *PH* 3 passage, too, the religious inconsistencies are said to amount to a “dispute” (*diaphōnia*; 218, cf. 233): precisely the term that is regularly used along with *anepikritos*, “undecidable”. But both passages also use another word to refer to the inconsistencies: *anōmalia*, “lack of uniformity”. This occurs at the conclusion of the tenth Mode (1.163) and numerous times in the *PH* 3 passage. And this suggests another kind of sceptical approach distinct from the one so far observed.

A lack of uniformity is not necessarily the same as a dispute. If one culture does its sacrifices one way and another does them another way, there is no conflict unless one culture claims, or they both claim, that their way of doing them is the way that in the nature of things, or universally, they *should* be done. And a lack of uniformity in beliefs on the same topic is not necessarily the same as a dispute either, provided the two or more sets of beliefs are somehow localized to distinct sets of circumstances. Now, in numerous places in these texts it looks as if Sextus

is pressing for precisely this kind of relativization to locations or circumstances. At the end of the tenth Mode he says that because of the “lack of uniformity” in the objects (*pragmatōn*), “we will not be able to say what the existing thing is like in its nature, but how it appears in relation to this way of life or in relation to this law or in relation to this custom, etc.” (*PH* 1.163). One could perhaps understand this as just another reference to undecidable dispute: people from different cultures have different views about ethical and religious matters, and there is no way to adjudicate between them. But in that case one would expect Sextus to refer to the lack of uniformity in people’s *opinions* about these things, not to lack of uniformity in the *objects*, a phrase repeated in the other passage (3.235). To speak of lack of uniformity in the objects suggests a somewhat different point: that things are not good or bad, pious or impious, across the board, but only in a given set of cultural circumstances.

Evidence of a similar line of thought appears in the *PH* 3 passage, especially in the section concentrating specifically on religious beliefs and practices. We are told that if anything was pious or impious by nature, the practice or belief concerning that thing would be the same everywhere. Most of the differences in question are cultural; for example, things that people in some cultures eat are considered impious to eat in other cultures. But many of the differences concerning sacrifice involve not incompatible practices in different cultures, but differences in what animals get sacrificed to which gods; it is pious to sacrifice goats to Artemis, for instance, but not to Asclepius (221). Yet both types of examples are used indiscriminately as evidence that nothing is *invariably*, or *by nature*, pious or impious.

This is an example of a pattern of thought that occurs periodically in Sextus. There is good reason to believe that it represents the survival of an earlier and distinct variety of Pyrrhonist scepticism: a variety associated with the originator of the later Pyrrhonist tradition, Aenesidemus. The summary referred to earlier of Aenesidemus’ book *Pyrrhonist Discourses* (Photius, *Bibliotheca* 169b18–171a4 [almost all reproduced as texts 71C and 72L in Long & Sedley 1987]) makes clear that Aenesidemus avoided assertions issued invariably – or, as the text puts it, “unambiguously” (*anamphibolōs*; 169b40, 170a29 [= 71c5,11]) – and instead favoured assertions that included a relativization to persons, times or circumstances. The summary also makes clear that Aenesidemus took this relativization to be a method for avoiding dogmatism; Aenesidemus criticizes the Academics of his day, who allegedly professed a sceptical philosophy, for making “unambiguous” assertions and thus failing to maintain sceptical caution. Then again, the Ten Modes, as presented by both Diogenes Laertius (9.79–88)⁵ and Sextus (*PH* 1.35–163), and elsewhere ascribed by Sextus to Aenesidemus (*M* 7.345), include

5. Diogenes’ account of the lives of Pyrrho and Timon (9.61–116) form an important supplement to the evidence on Pyrrhonism supplied by Sextus. The Hicks translation (1925) is complete; a far superior, but excerpted translation appears in Inwood & Gerson (1997: III-22, III-23).

numerous examples of relativity as an apparent means to suspension of judgement; Sextus' tenth Mode is by no means the only instance. And other examples can be found in Sextus, notably in *Against the Ethicists*.⁶

According to this line of thinking, then, sacrificing goats is not pious or impious by nature, because it is not pious or impious in all circumstances but only in some: that is, depending on which god is the recipient. And eating pork is not pious or impious by nature, because it is acceptable to Greeks but thoroughly unacceptable to Jews and Egyptian priests (223). The two types of cases may seem rather different; but, as noted above, Sextus considers both of them alike to be evidence for the failure of these practices to measure up to the standard of invariability. In order for a certain practice to count as by nature pious, apparently, it would have to be considered pious by everyone and its piety would have to be unrestricted with regard to circumstances. It is not surprising that nothing meets this standard.

Before we move on, it should be re-emphasized that the line of thought involving relativity to circumstances is not upheld consistently in the passages dealing with religion in ethical contexts. Alongside it and, arguably, overshadowing it is the other sceptical approach, the standard and official one in Sextus, according to which suspension of judgement is induced by the undecidability of the dispute among opposing positions. This is not the only place where Sextus has not succeeded in fully integrating material from an earlier phase of Pyrrhonism into the version to which he is explicitly committed. But, whatever may be true in other cases, in the particular case of religion the implications of the two versions may be somewhat different. I shall return to this point in closing.

SEXTUS' OWN ATTITUDE TO RELIGION, AND ITS APPARENT INCONSISTENCY

The Pyrrhonist sceptic, then, suspends judgement about the existence and nature of the gods, and does not hold any opinions to the effect that specific religious practices or beliefs are either pious or impious by nature. Where does this leave the sceptic's own attitude towards the ordinary religious practice of his community? Sextus makes clear in several places that he and his Pyrrhonist colleagues do not by any means withdraw from this ordinary practice. It is not unusual for him to claim to be on the side of ordinary attitudes, as against the theoretical abstractions of the dogmatists. The difficulty is to see how to understand this in the case of religion.

As I mentioned earlier, Sextus claims that the sceptic lives by following the appearances. In the opening sections of *PH* he lists four main categories of

6. I have discussed this topic in my translation of *Against the Ethicists* (1997) and in Bett (2000: ch. 4).

appearances that guide one's choices and actions. One of these is "the handing down of laws and customs" (23). And as an example of an activity the sceptic engages in through the prompting of laws and customs, he says "we accept acting piously as good and acting impiously as bad, in terms of ordinary life (*biōtikōs*)" (24). Elsewhere, laws and customs are appealed to as a basis for acting in the face of an ethical crisis (*M* 11.163–6) and as a basis for living more generally (*PH* 1.17, 231, 237); it is clear from the present passage that acceptance, in some form, of everyday religious practice is part of this package. It is also clear that the qualification "in terms of ordinary life" is meant to mark a contrast with the kind of beliefs about the gods that involve dogmatic commitments: or, as Sextus often puts it, the holding of opinions.

Similarly, Sextus prefaces his discussion of God in the physical part of *PH* 3 by saying that "following ordinary life without opinions, we say that there are gods and we revere the gods and we say that they are provident; it is against the rashness of the dogmatists that we say the following" (2). This is picked up later in the passage (6), where we are told that one must suspend judgement about the existence of God "as far as the Dogmatists are concerned"; again, the implication is clearly that there is a level of religious discussion that is unaffected by the arguments in this section. And in *Against the Physicists*, at the start of the section on the existence of God, he says that:

the sceptic will perhaps be found to be safer than those who philosophize in other ways, since in accordance with his ancestral customs and laws he says that there are gods and does everything that contributes to worship and reverence of them, but makes no rash claims as far as philosophical investigation is concerned. (*M* 9.49)

There are various ways in which one might understand the notion of 'safety' here. But whatever exactly Sextus has in mind, it is clear that he takes the sceptic's suspension of judgement to be somehow compatible with his involvement in the traditional religious practice of his society. In this respect, again, he treats religious customs as no different from any other social customs; in general, the sceptic does what his society prescribes as to be done. The fact that he takes the trouble to emphasize this in discussions of both the existence and nature of God does suggest, however, that he sees a potential for these discussions to be understood as undermining ordinary religion.

Why do they not do so? Or, in other words, what exactly does Sextus mean by claiming that, in a religious context, the sceptic can do and say things "in terms of ordinary life" without violating suspension of judgement? One possible answer⁷ is that the sceptic performs the *actions* involved in religious rituals, but does not

7. See Barnes (1997: esp. 84–6); Bailey (2002: 192–3).

hold any of the beliefs that we might think are associated with them; he does these things because he has been raised in a society in which these things are done, but not because he *believes* these are the *right* things to do, or the things the gods want us to do. The things in question include sacrifices, dietary choices and other matters of religious behaviour, but they also include *saying* certain things in appropriate contexts, such as ‘the gods are provident’. The sceptic does not, on this interpretation, thereby express any belief, and so there is no conflict between these actions and utterances and the suspension of judgement he declares in his writings. This stance may be regarded as hypocritical or disingenuous, either because it involves him in saying things without believing them, or because it renders dubious his claim to be following ordinary life.

Another interpretation, which arguably puts Sextus in a better light, has recently been suggested by Julia Annas.⁸ Annas proposes that we should draw a distinction between theological beliefs, which are the province of philosophers, including the sceptic when debating philosophically, and religious beliefs and practices, which belong to ordinary people, including the sceptic when “following ordinary life”. Theological beliefs, then, concern whether or not the gods really exist and what their true nature is, while religious beliefs are beliefs bound up with the everyday business of religion, such as ‘it is pious to sacrifice a goat to Artemis but not to Asclepius’. And Annas’ suggestion is that sceptical suspension of judgement about theological beliefs is compatible with the holding of religious beliefs; for religious beliefs do not entail theological beliefs; it is only philosophers, not ordinary religious practitioners, who even entertain theological beliefs. Or at least, she suggests, this is true in the context of pagan religion, where there is no overarching doctrine – particularly of a monotheistic kind, which tends by its nature to claim exclusive title to the truth – and where one culture is quite happy to accept that another culture has different gods from its own. In this situation, the question whether the gods recognized in a given culture are *really* the gods that exist in the nature of things is not one that it would occur to ordinary non-philosophical members of that culture to ask. Thus ordinary religious belief and practice can proceed quite happily without any engagement with the kinds of philosophical debates Sextus draws on; and suspension of judgement about the outcome of those debates does not create any difficulty for the sceptic’s own involvement with that ordinary belief and practice.

This is an attractive suggestion, which has the merit of taking seriously the important differences between ancient pagan religion and monotheistic religions. And it may be that the religious attitudes of ordinary people in that context were indeed immune to philosophical scrutiny as Annas describes. This interpretation also makes good sense of Sextus’ repeated insistence on the fact that his

8. Annas (forthcoming). I have learned a great deal from this paper, despite some significant disagreements.

philosophical discussions are directed against the rashness of the dogmatists. The difficulty, however, is that it does not seem to square with Sextus' own picture of the relation between ordinary religious beliefs and philosophical views about God.

For one thing, the things that Sextus claims the sceptics say in everyday religious contexts seem to include the *same* kinds of things as are subjected to sceptical scrutiny: according to him, the sceptics say *that there are gods* (*PH* 3.2; *M* 9.49) and that they are provident (*PH* 3.2), but these are precisely the propositions that are undermined in the discussions that immediately follow. In addition, although Sextus does emphasize that his philosophical discussions are directed against the dogmatists, this does not prevent him including the views of ordinary people alongside those of dogmatic philosophers in the mix of items to be placed in mutual opposition. At the beginning of the discussion of the existence of God in *Against the Physicists*, he lists as believers in God's existence "most of the dogmatists and the common preconception of ordinary life" (*M* 9.50); these are then contrasted with atheists and with sceptical suspenders of judgement. It is true that the subsequent arguments rehearsed on the positive side of the issue are all dogmatists' arguments. But this is hardly surprising, since *arguments* on this score are precisely the province of philosophers, not ordinary people; this does not negate the fact that suspension of judgement is presented as an alternative to ordinary people's belief in gods just as much as to dogmatists' beliefs in gods.

This point is reinforced at the end of the discussion. Sextus says that the opposing arguments from the dogmatists lead to sceptical suspension of judgement. He then says that to these oppositions can be added "the lack of uniformity about the gods in ordinary life" (*M* 9.191). And although, as noted earlier, the term "lack of uniformity" need not indicate outright conflict, in this case Sextus is quite explicit that this is what is at issue. For he then says that "Different people have different and discordant suppositions about them [i.e. the gods], so that neither are all of them [i.e. the suppositions] trustworthy because of the conflict between them, nor are some of them because of their equal strength" (192). Presumably this conflict is about the nature and perhaps the number of the gods, since he has already said that ordinary people quite generally believe in the existence of gods. But the conflict and "equal strength" among the alternative views nonetheless encourages suspension of judgement about the gods' existence because if no one view of their nature is of greater plausibility than any other, one might well begin to wonder whether there are any gods at all. It is clear, then, that Sextus takes ordinary religious beliefs to be relevant to the sceptical outcome of his whole discussion; while the arguments of the dogmatists are his main focus, he does not take ordinary beliefs to be on a separate level from these, immune to the effects of his sceptical procedure.

The same can be said of the discussion of ethical and religious inconsistencies in *PH* 3. The dispute about the existence and nature of the gods includes numerous named philosophers. But Sextus begins (218) by saying that "most people" (*hoi polloi*) believe that there are gods. And shortly afterwards (219) he

makes it explicit that ordinary people's views are included among the conflicting beliefs in this area, saying that "of people in ordinary life, too, some say that there is one god, others that there are many and of different forms", adding a few of the more outlandish examples of the "different forms" gods are supposed by some to take. The same is true of the "oppositions" cited in the tenth Mode in *PH* 1. Among the religious, as opposed to the purely ethical, items here placed in opposition are both "dogmatic suppositions" (145, etc.) and ordinary beliefs about the gods drawn from mythology (*muthikai pisteis*; 145). "Dogmatic suppositions" are opposed to one another (e.g. 151); beliefs from myth are opposed to one another (e.g. 150); and dogmatic suppositions are opposed to beliefs from myth (e.g. 161–2). Here again, then, there is no question of ordinary religious beliefs being treated as distinct from the theological beliefs of philosophers; beliefs from one category can confront beliefs from the other, and all of them are grist for the sceptic's mill.

ATTEMPTS TO MITIGATE SEXTUS' INCONSISTENCY, AND THEIR FAILURE

So we are back where we were before. Sextus claims to be religious just as ordinary people are religious; this includes doing certain things, such as sacrificing the right animals to the right gods, and it includes saying certain things, such as that the gods exist and that they are provident. And yet the existence and providential nature of the gods, among other general features of the gods, are precisely the topics on which his sceptical machinery is used to generate suspension of judgement. Sextus seems to recognize that his sceptical exercises in this area might leave him open to criticism as irreligious; as noted earlier, this is the obvious explanation of the care he takes to emphasize up front that he is religious in the ordinary way, and that his quarrel is with the dogmatists. The trouble is that this does not seem consistent with the fact that ordinary religious beliefs (in general, not just a selected, perhaps non-Greek, set) figure alongside dogmatic theological positions in the material at which the sceptical machinery is directed.

This is not the only case where the beliefs of ordinary people are among the beliefs from which Sextus says the sceptic suspends judgement. Another is the case of beliefs about good and bad, a very important subject for Sextus; this is discussed in the opening section of *PH* 1 (27–30), and in the ethical section of *PH* 3 (235–8) as well as, at much greater length, in *Against the Ethicists* (*M* 11.110–67). Now, in the first of these passages he specifies that it is ordinary people (*idiōtai*; 30) – not just philosophers – who hold that certain things are by nature good or bad. In this case, then, Sextus does not claim to be fully in harmony with ordinary life; while the laws and customs of his native land may shape the sceptic's behaviour, including when he is confronted with appalling ethical dilemmas (*M* 11.163–6), he lacks the additional component of belief that both ordinary people and dogmatic philosophers have. Given the fact that ordinary religious beliefs as well

as dogmatic beliefs about the gods serve as material for sceptical scrutiny, one might have expected that the case of religion would be parallel. But in this case Sextus arguably states, and at least strongly implies, that his stance towards religion is no different from that of ordinary people.

To return to a theme introduced earlier, it is hard not to see this as at least somewhat disingenuous. It is by now something of a commonplace that one should not think of ancient pagan religion as centred primarily around beliefs; what is most basic are the rituals themselves, and these did not necessarily – and in some cases, clearly did not in fact – carry with them any particular beliefs about why they were to be performed, or about the character of the gods in whose honour they were being performed. And this might seem to fit rather well with Sextus' description of his own religious attitude as a simple product of law and custom; he engages in certain sacrifices and dietary habits because those are the things he was raised to do – purely as a matter of habit, without any belief that these are the *right* things to do – and so too, one might say, did practitioners of ancient religion in general, if much recent scholarship on the subject is on the right lines. But this does not fit with what Sextus himself says (rightly or wrongly) about ordinary religious practitioners, and it sits uneasily with some of what he says about his own religious practice. On Sextus' picture ordinary people do *not* merely go through rituals as a matter of custom; they also hold beliefs about the gods, and these beliefs are among those on which the sceptic suspends judgement. And Sextus' own religious practice, which he presents as in conformity with ordinary practice, includes saying certain things that are among the very things on which he elsewhere induces suspension of judgement.

None of this is to deny that there may be a level of everyday belief that is immune from sceptical argumentation and that the sceptic may perfectly well adopt. The exact nature of the sceptic's everyday beliefs, if any, is a central and unresolved issue in the interpretation of ancient Greek scepticism. But although Sextus insists that he is in conformity with everyday attitudes when it comes to religion, *this* is not a case where he professes beliefs in an everyday context that can be considered immune from the effects of his scepticism. Rather, it is a case, like that of beliefs about what is really good and bad, where the beliefs of ordinary people – at least, as he himself interprets them – touch on the real nature of things, and are therefore vulnerable to sceptical scrutiny. So despite his claim to be in tune with ordinary life, he cannot consistently hold some of the religious beliefs that, on his own view, ordinary people hold.

CONCLUSION

This is a disappointing and, one might even say, a boring result. Our initial impression turns out to be correct. But it is not, perhaps, quite the end of the story. As we saw, there are traces of a different form of Pyrrhonism in which relativity,

rather than undecidability, seems to play a leading role. On this model, the sceptic achieves his desired result by refusing legitimacy to any claims to the effect that something is a certain way *by nature* – where ‘by nature’ is understood to entail ‘invariably and without regard to circumstances’ – and by restricting himself to statements in which some form of relativization to circumstances is explicit. In the context of religion, such relativized statements include those concerning the kinds of sacrifices to be made to certain gods (but not other gods), and those concerning the religious practices that qualify as acceptable in a specific society (but not in other societies). Now, if the sceptic permits himself statements of this kind, and if ordinary religious discourse is thought to consist of statements of this kind, then it is easier to see how Sextus could claim that his religious attitudes are in tune with those of ordinary people, and that these attitudes are not liable to be undermined by sceptical argumentation. And in this context, a distinction such as the one Annas draws between religious beliefs and theological beliefs is easier to maintain. On the one hand, philosophers can worry about whether there are gods, and if so what they are like, in the real nature of things; and on the other, ordinary religious practice and discourse can proceed without having to consider such matters. Finally, this picture seems to fit comfortably with the largely practice-centred character of ancient pagan religion, where ordinary religious beliefs, such as ‘It is pious to sacrifice goats to Artemis’, seem to be ratifications or even descriptions of ordinary practices rather than global statements about the nature of the divine.

The picture is not, of course, immune to question. One might wonder, first, why the fact that a certain practice is not *considered* pious in some culture means that it *is not* by nature pious. Are we to assume that if a practice is not *considered* pious in some culture, then it *is not* pious in that culture (and therefore not invariably, or by nature, pious)? If so, what licenses that assumption? And in any case, what does it mean to say that some practice is pious in one culture but not in another? Might this not lead to a relativism of an arguably incoherent kind? Finally, supposing a philosopher were to interrogate an ordinary religious practitioner and ask ‘So do you believe there really are gods or don’t you?’, can the ordinary person really answer ‘That’s none of my concern?’ Certainly those in antiquity who were accused, rightly or wrongly, of being atheists were taken to be saying something that undermined ordinary religion. But it is hard to see how this could be so unless ordinary religion was understood to be committed to the general claim that gods do exist.

It may be, then, that the version of Pyrrhonism centred around relativity was inherently unstable in the case of religion. But it at least looks as if it might have been a more promising way for Sextus to combine adherence to ordinary religion with sceptical attack on dogmatic beliefs about the gods. Be that as it may, the relativity model, as we have seen, makes only a vestigial appearance in Sextus’ treatment of religion. The dominant line of thought here makes quite clear, on the contrary, that ordinary religion *is* committed to the general claim that the gods

exist; and Sextus does not even try to evade the consequence, which is that ordinary religion, just like dogmatic theology, is subject to sceptical scrutiny. And if this is accepted, the prospects for reconciling ordinary religion and scepticism about the existence of God seem dim indeed.

FURTHER READING

Burnyeat, M. (ed.) 1983. *The Skeptical Tradition*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
Burnyeat, M. & M. Frede (eds) 1997. *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

On PIETY see also Chs 4, 5, 6. On RITUAL see also Ch. 20; Vol. 4, Chs 9, 20, 21. On SCEPTICISM see also Vol. 3, Ch. 5; Vol. 4, Ch. 11.

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