

Topics in Hellenistic Philosophy: Scepticism

Course Description

Here's one way of describing the ancient route into scepticism:

- We lead our lives guided by our beliefs.
- But our beliefs could be false.
- Action is based on beliefs.
- If our beliefs are false, we are bound to act in a way that will make our lives miserable.
- We don't want to be miserable.
- Thus, we have a strong motive for ridding ourselves of false beliefs. We want happiness, and we want peace of mind.
- How does one get rid of false beliefs? Most obviously, by aiming for true beliefs (and ultimately for knowledge).
- How does one arrive at true beliefs and knowledge? Through investigation.
- Investigation is the path to a good life: once we have true beliefs, we can base our actions on them, and rest assured in being on the right track.
- But while we are investigating, we find arguments for several sides of each issue. Rather than arrive at the truth, we run into unresolved and seemingly irresolvable conflicts.
- The mind is paralyzed—we suspend judgment.
- It turns out that suspension of judgment brings with it its own kind of tranquility. So, in some sense, we surprisingly get what we wanted: tranquility.
- We now need a set of argumentative techniques that help us arrive at suspension of judgment on any given issue.

A life of sceptical investigation generates a life without belief. But, as critics of the sceptics are quick to point out, it may not be possible to live without beliefs.

This question—whether one can live, act, investigate, and speak without holding beliefs—is the central question of the seminar. We study key conceptions of ancient epistemology, including: knowledge, belief, hypothesis, proof, concepts, criterion of truth, evidence, impressions, cognition, and appearances.

Outline of readings and topics

Week 1: Belief, Knowledge, Suspension of Judgment

Introduction to central topics in ancient scepticism.

Reading: Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines* I.1-24.

Week 2: Plato on Appearances

Plato engages with an epistemological view that he sees as a correlate of Heraclitean metaphysics: if everything is in flux, there are no particulars, and accordingly no objects of knowledge. The natural world dissolves into a world of appearances, and “man is the measure.”

Reading: Part I of Plato's *Theaetetus*, which is devoted to the critical examination of the thesis “Knowledge is perception.”

Week 3: Epicurus and Aenesidemus on Sense Perception and Appearances

Epicurus famously says “all sense perceptions are true.” Compare this to the sceptic Aenesidemus, whose modes of argument lead to suspension of judgment on sensory (and other) appearances.

Reading: Selections from Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*.

Week 4: The Sceptic is like a Plant

Why there cannot be a proof for everything. And why the sceptic is like a plant.

Reading: Aristotle's *Metaphysics* IV.4; selections from Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*. I.1, 3; selections from Plato's *Meno*.

Week 5: Cognitive Impressions

Arcesilaus, the first major Academic sceptic, develops his philosophy in what looks like an exchange between him and Zeno (the founder of Stoicism). The contentious question: whether there are cognitive impressions, and thus, whether there is a criterion of truth.

Readings: Fragments from Long and Sedley; selections from Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*.

Week 6: Examination and Hypothesis

Carneades, the second major Academic sceptic, engages with Stoic and Epicurean norms for belief-formation. Further, he seems to engage with a Platonic idea: that beliefs can be held hypothetically.

Readings: Fragments from Long and Sedley; selections from Cicero; selections from Plato's *Meno*.

Week 7: Sextus on Belief

Scholars disagree on a central issue in the interpretation of Pyrrhonian Scepticism. When Sextus says that the sceptic does not 'dogmatize,' does he say that the sceptic does not hold any theoretical beliefs (but still holds ordinary beliefs of some sort), or does he say that the sceptic does not hold any beliefs at all?

Readings: Selections from Sextus' *Outlines*; Burnyeat and Frede, *The Original Sceptics*.

Week 8: The Sceptic's Life

Anti-sceptical objection 1: Without beliefs, the sceptic cannot act.

Readings: Selections from Sextus' *Outlines*.

Week 9: Truth and Tranquility

Anti-sceptical objection 2: The sceptic says she investigates. But her aim is tranquility. However, investigation is only investigation if it aims at the truth. If sceptical argument aims at suspension and peace of mind, it is not investigation. The sceptic is not a sceptic ('investigator').

Readings: Selections from Sextus' *Outlines*.

Week 10: Investigation and Concepts

Anti-sceptical objection 3: The sceptic leads a life of investigation. His critics say that this is inconsistent (involves the holding of beliefs). Investigation makes use of concepts, and thus of conceptual knowledge.

Readings: Selections from Sextus' *Outlines* and from his *Adversus Mathematicos*.

Week 11: Belief and Language

If the sceptic does not hold beliefs, how can he even communicate? Sextus develops a mode of speech for the sceptic, designed to enable the sceptic to 'report' what appears to him, without making any assertions.

Readings: Selections from Sextus' *Outlines* and from his *Adversus Mathematicos*.

Week 12: The Modes of Agrippa

The Modes of Agrippa focus on issues of justification. By using these argument forms, the sceptic can lead her interlocutor (and herself) to suspension of judgment on any given issue.

Readings: Selections from Sextus' *Outlines*.

Week 13: Proof

When Sextus begins his discussion of logic, he says that the sceptic needs to address two topics: whether there is a criterion of truth, and whether there is proof. Discussion of proof invokes the Epicurean distinction between the evident and the non-evident.

Readings: Selections from Sextus' *Outlines* and from his *Against the Mathematicians*.

Requirements

Outlines

All students are expected to come to class with a brief outline of the assigned reading (notes that you make for yourself while reading the text; ok if handwritten). Undergraduate students are expected to hand in their outlines at the beginning of class (you might want to bring an extra copy for yourself). No grades are assigned for these outlines. The reading is usually very short, but dense. The point of these outlines is to sketch the main arguments, and to explain key terminology or make a note of what concepts are incomprehensible on the basis of the assigned readings.

Papers

One 15-page term paper, or three 5-page papers. 5-page papers are response papers to the weekly readings. If you prefer to write a term paper, please talk to me about the topic. I will make some suggestions.

Deadlines:

- You should decide whether you write three 5-page papers or one 15-page paper by the first week of February. Please let me know by email.
- If you write three 5-page papers, at least one paper must be submitted prior to the Spring Break, and at least two papers must be submitted one week after the Spring Break.
- If you write the 15-page paper, please submit a brief outline of your topic by the end of April or earlier.

Readings

Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers: Vol 1* (Cambridge 1987); Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, ed. by Annas and Barnes (CAM 2002); Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, tr. Brittain (Hackett 2006); Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Ethicists*, tr. Bett (Oxford 2000); Burnyeat and Frede (ed.), *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy* (Hackett 1998); papers from forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism*, ed. Bett.