The Modes of Scepticism
Ancient Texts and Modern Interpretations

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6 The Senses

Sextus, PHI 91-9:

91 Nonetheless, so is to arrive at suspension of judgement even when resting the argument on a single person, such as the Wise Man they dream up, we bring out the mode which is third in order. This, we said, is the one deriving from the differences among the senses. Now, that the senses disagree with one another, is clear.

92 For instance, paintings seem to sight to have recesses and projections, but not to touch. And honey appears pleasant to the tongue (for some people) but unpleasant to the eyes; it is impossible, therefore, to say whether it is purely pleasant or unpleasant. Similarly with perfume; it gratifies the sense of smell, but displeases the sense of taste. Again, since spurge-juice is painful to the eyes but painless to the rest of the body, we will not be able to say whether, as far as its own nature goes, it is purely painless to bodies or painful. Rain-water is beneficial to the eyes, but is rough on the windpipe and lungs — so too is olive oil, though it comforts the skin. The sea-ray when applied to the extremities paralyses them, but can be put on the rest of the body harmlessly.

Hence we will not be able to say what each of these things is like in its nature, though it is possible to say what they appear to be like on any given occasion.

94 More cases than these can be given; but so as not to waste time, given the purpose of our treatise, we should say this. Each of the objects of perception that appear to us seems to impress us in a variety of ways — for example an apple is smooth, fragrant, sweet and yellow. It is unclear, then, whether in reality it has these qualities alone, or has only one quality but appears different depending on the different constitution of the sense-organs, or actually has more qualities than those which are apparent, some of them not making an impression on us.

95 That it has only one quality can be argued from what we said before (I 53-4) about the nourishment dispersed in our bodies and the water dispersed in trees and the breath in flutes and pipes and similar instruments;* for the apple can be undifferentiated but observed as different depending on the differences among the sense-organs by which it is grasped.

96 That the apple may have more qualities than those apparent to us we deduce as follows. Let us conceive of someone who from birth has touch, smell and taste, but hears and sees nothing. He will suppose that there is absolutely nothing visible or audible, and that there exist only those three kinds of quality which he is able to grasp. So it is possible that we too, having only the five senses, grasp from among the qualities in the apple* only those we are capable of grasping, although other qualities can exist, impressing other sense-organs in which we have no share, so that we do not grasp the objects perceptible by them.*

98 But nature, someone will say, has made the senses commensurable with their objects. What nature? — given that there is so much undecided dispute among the dogmatists about its very existence. For if someone decides this question (namely, whether there is such a thing as nature), then if he is a layman he will not be credible according to them, while if he is a philosopher he will be part of the dispute and under judgement himself rather than a judge.

99 But if it is possible* that just those qualities exist in the apple which we think we grasp, or that there are more than them, or again that there are not even those that impress us, then it will be unclear to us what the apple is like.

The same argument applies to the other objects of perception too.

However, if the senses do not apprehend external objects, the intellect is not able to apprehend them either (since its guides fail it); so by means of this argument too suspension of judgement about external existing objects will seem to be inferred.

Diogenes IX 81:

Third is the mode depending on the differences among the channels of perception. An apple, for instance, is experienced as yellow to sight, sweet to taste, and fragrant to smell. The same shape is observed as different depending on the differences in the
7 Circumstances

Sextus, PHI 100–17:

100 In order to end up with suspension of judgement even if we rest the argument on any single sense or actually leave the senses aside, we also adopt the fourth mode of suspension. This is the mode that gets its name from circumstances, where by ‘circumstances’ we mean conditions. It is observed, we say, in natural or unnatural states, in waking or sleeping, depending on age, on moving or being at rest, on hating or loving, on being in need or sated, on being drunk or sober, on anterior conditions, on being confident or fearful, on being in distress or in a state of enjoyment.

101 For example, objects impress us as dissimilar depending on our being in a natural or an unnatural state, since people who are delirious or divinely possessed think that they hear spirits, while we do not; and similarly they often say that they grasp an exhalation of storax or frankincense or the like, and many other things, while we do not perceive them. The same water seems to be boiling when poured on to inflamed places, but to us to be lukewarm. The same cloak appears orange to people with a blood-suffusion in the eye, but not to me; and the same honey appears sweet to me, but bitter to people with jaundice.

102 If anyone says that it is the mixing of certain humours that produces inappropriate appearances from existing objects in people who are in an unnatural state, we should tell him that, since healthy people too have mixed humours, it is possible that these humours are making the external existing objects appear different to the healthy, while they are by nature the way they appear to people in so-called unnatural states. For to grant one lot of humours, but not the other, the power of changing external objects has an air of fiction. For, just as healthy people are in a state natural for the healthy, but unnatural for the sick, so the sick are in a state unnatural for the healthy but natural for the sick, so that they too are in a state which is, relatively, natural, and they too should be credited.

104 Different appearances come about depending on sleeping or waking. When we are awake, we view things differently from the way we do when asleep, and when asleep differently from the way we do when awake; so the existence or non-existence of the objects* becomes not absolute but relative — relative to being asleep or awake. It is likely, then, that when asleep we will see things which are unreal in waking life, not unreal once and for all. For they exist in sleep, just as the contents of waking life exist even though they do not exist in sleep.

105 Appearances differ depending on age. The same air seems cold to old men but mild to the young, the same colour appears faint to the elderly but intense to the young, and similarly the same sound seems to the former dim but to the latter clearly audible.

106 Those who differ in age are also affected dissimilarly depending on their choices and avoidances. Children, for example, are serious about balls and hoops, while the young choose other things, and old men yet others. From this is inferred that different appearances come about from the same existing objects depending on differences in age.

107 Objects appear dissimilar depending on moving or being at rest. Things which we see as still when we are stationary seem to us to move when we sail past them.

108 Depending on loving or hating; some people have an excessive revulsion against pork, while others consume it with great pleasure. Hence Menander said:

   How foul he appears even in his looks
   since he has become like this! What an animal!
   Doing no wrong actually makes us beautiful.

   [frag. 790 Koerle]

And many men who have ugly girl-friends think them most attractive.

109 Depending on being hungry or sated: the same food seems most pleasant to people who are hungry, but unpleasant to the sated.

   Depending on being drunk or sober: things which we think shameful when sober do not appear shameful to us when we are drunk.
110 Depending on anterior conditions: the same wine appears sour to people who have just eaten dates or figs, but it seems to be sweet to people who have consumed nuts or chickpeas. And the bath-house vestibule warms people entering from outside, but chills people leaving if they wait around in it.

111 Depending on being afraid or confident: the same object seems fearful and dreadful to the coward, but not at all to someone bolder.

Depending on being in distress or in a state of enjoyment: the same objects are annoying to people in distress and pleasant to people who are enjoying themselves.

112 Since, therefore, there is so much anomaly depending on conditions, and since at different times people come to be in different conditions, it is no doubt easy to say what each existing object appears to be like to each person, but not to say what it is like, since the anomalies are in fact undecidable.

For anyone who decides on them is either in some of the above conditions or in absolutely no condition at all. But to say that he is in no condition whatsoever (for example, neither healthy nor sick, neither moving nor at rest, of no particular age, and free from the other conditions) is perfectly silly. But if he is in some condition as he judges the appearances, he will be a part of the dispute. And again he will not be an unbiased judge of external existing objects because he will have been contaminated by the conditions he is in. So a waking person cannot compare the appearances of sleepers with those of people awake, or a healthy person those of the sick with those of the healthy; for we assent to what is present and affects us in the present rather than to what is not present.

113 And there is another reason why the anomalies among such appearances are undecidable. For anyone who prefers one appearance to another and one circumstance to another does so either without making a judgement and without proof, or making a judgement and offering a proof. But he can do so neither without these (for he will not be credible) nor with them.

For if he judges the appearances, he will certainly judge them by means of a standard. Now he will say of this standard either that it is true or that it is false. If false, he will not be credible. But if he says it is true, then he will say that the standard is true either without proof or with proof. But if without proof, he will not be credible. If with proof, he will certainly need the proof to be true; otherwise he will not be credible.

Then will he say, that the proof he adopts to warrant the standard is true after judging it or without judging it? If he has not judged it, he will not be credible. But if he has judged it, clearly he will say that he has judged it by means of a standard— but we shall make investigations for a proof of that standard, and then for a standard for that proof. For a proof always requires a standard in order to be confirmed, and a standard always requires a proof in order to be shown to be true. A proof cannot be sound if there is no true standard there already, nor can a standard be true if a proof has not been already warranted.

117 And in this way both standards and proofs fall into the reciprocal mode in which both of them are found not to be credible: each of them waits for credit from the other* and so each is as lacking credibility as the other.

If, then, one cannot prefer one appearance to another either without a proof and a standard or with them, the different appearances that come about depending on different conditions will be undecidable. So suspension of judgement about the nature of external existing objects is introduced by way of this mode too.

**Diogenes IX 82:**

82 *Fourth* is the mode depending on *conditions and common variations*: for example, health and disease, sleeping and waking, joy and sorrow, youth and old age, confidence and fear, need and repletion, hate and love, heating and chilling. Depending on breathing, depending on having one's channels blocked. So things experienced appear different depending on their kind of condition. For not even mad people are in a state which is contrary to nature— why them rather than us? For even we see the sun as stationary. When Theon of Tithorea, the Stoic, went to bed he used to walk about in his sleep. (And Pericles' slave on the roof-top.)

**Philo 178-80:**

178 But why mention facts like these? Each single one of us on his own, paradoxical as it is, undergoes thousands of shifts and changes in both body and soul, now choosing and now rejecting...
in a position to know. A relativist does not suspend judgement. He holds, first, that your coat is not in itself white or orange (or any other colour) but rather that it is white relative to those with normal eyes, orange relative to those with black eyes, and so on. And he holds secondly that he can tell all there is to tell about colours: he can tell that the coat is, say, orange relative to those with black eyes – and there is nothing else to tell about its colour.

Let us now generalise the point. Take any opposition of the form:

(1) $x$ appears $F$ in $S$
(2) $x$ appears $F^*$ in $S^*$.

Sceptics suppose that $x$ really is $F$ or $F^*$; but they cannot tell which. Relativists infer that $x$ is neither $F$ nor $F^*$; it is $F$ in $S$ and $F^*$ in $S^*$ – as they can easily tell.

Relativism, far from being assimilable to scepticism, is actually incompatible with it. For relativists deny that there is anything to be known about $x$ which they do not know: they know that $x$ is $F$ in $S$, $F^*$ in $S^*$ – and there is nothing more than that to be known about $x$, $F$, and $F^*$. They are not sceptics, for they deny that there is anything to be sceptical about. Where the sceptic finds matters on which he must suspend judgement, they find no matter at all.

We have laboured this point partly because relativism and scepticism are persistently confused, partly because relativism often seems to us a correct alternative to scepticism. Consider an easy case. Mud appears pleasant to pigs, unpleasant to humans. The sceptic finds a puzzle here, and claims that he cannot tell whether mud is really pleasant or unpleasant. The relativist finds no puzzle: mud is pleasant for pigs, unpleasant for humans – and that is all there is to it. The relativist is surely right: scepticism about ‘real’ pleasantness in this case is silly.

Other cases are harder. Relativism is not always the right response, and in many cases it is a difficult and controversial question whether relativism is true. Nor is relativism always a trivial response. Take colours, for example. Many philosophers take a relativistic view of colours. But some people will resist the suggestion that rubies are not red in themselves or by nature but only red relative to normal human observers. However that may be, and whether we decide for or against relativism in any particular case, we must recognise that the relativist is the sceptic’s enemy, not his ally, and that victory for relativism is defeat for scepticism.

8 Places and Positions

Sextus, PH1 118–23:

118 The fifth argument is the one depending on positions and intervals and places – for depending on each of these the same objects appear different.

For example, the same colonnade appears foreshortened when seen from one end, but completely symmetrical when seen from the middle. The same boat appears from a distance small and stationary, but from close at hand large and in motion. The same tower appears from a distance round, but from close at hand square. These depend on intervals.

Depending on places: lamplight appears dim in sunlight but bright in the dark. The same oar appears bent in water, but straight when out of it. Eggs appear soft in the bird but hard in the air. Lyngurion appears liquid inside the lynx, but hard in the air. Coral appears soft in the sea, but hard in the air. And sound appears different when produced in a pipe, in a flute, or simply in the air.

120 Depending on positions: the same picture when laid down appears flat, but when put at a certain angle seems to have recesses and projections. Doves’ necks appear different in colour depending on the different ways they turn them.

121 Since, then, all apparent things are observed in some place and from some interval and in some position, and each of these produces a great deal of variation in appearances, as we have suggested, we shall be forced to arrive at suspension of judgement by these modes too.*

For anyone wishing to give preference to some of these appearances over others will be attempting the impossible. If he makes his declaration simply and without proof, he will not be credible. But if he wants to use a proof, then if he says the proof is false, he will overturn himself, and if he says the proof is true, he
will be required to give a proof of its being true, and another proof of that, since it too has to be true, and so ad infinitum. But it is impossible to establish infinitely many proofs. And so he will not be able to prefer one appearance to another with a proof either. But if no-one can decide among the above appearances either without proof or with proof, suspension of judgement is inferred; we are no doubt able to say what each thing appears to be like given this position or that interval or this place, but we are not able, for the above reasons, to declare what it is like in its nature.

**Diogenes IX 85–6:**

Seventh is the mode depending on distances, kinds of position, places and occupants of places. According to this mode, things that seem big appear small, square things appear round, level things appear to have projections, straight things appear bent, pale things appear coloured. For instance, the sun, depending on its interval from us, appears a foot across.* Mountains appear airy* and smooth from a distance, but rugged from close at hand. 86 Again, the sun as it rises has quite a different appearance from the sun at its zenith. The same body* has a different appearance in a thicket and on open ground. A picture appears different depending on its kind of position, and a dove’s neck depending on the way it turns. So, since it is not possible to perceive these things apart from places and positions*, it is not known what their nature is.

**Philo 181–3:**

181 The instability of appearances depends in no small measure on the positions, the intervals and the places in which things are located.

182 Do we not see fish in the sea appearing larger than they are in reality when they swim with their fins stretched out? Oars too, however straight they are, come to look bent under water.

183 Distant objects produce false appearances and usually deceive our minds: lifeless things are on occasion assumed to be living and living things on the contrary to be lifeless; again, stationary things are taken to be moving and moving things to be stationary, approaching things to be receding and departing things to be advancing, extremely long things to be very short and angular things to be round. And plain sight produces a thousand other distortions which no-one in his senses would endorse as being firm.

With the Fifth Mode, which depends on ‘positions and intervals and places’, Sextus turns from the observer to the observed. In connexion with this mode Philo remarks that ‘plain sight produces a thousand other distortions’ (§183), and his remark suggests an explanation of the order of the modes: even if we manage to rebut the first four modes and are able to settle on some favoured observer or sense (‘plain sight’, for example), there are still features of the appearances independent of the observer which will generate suspension of judgement. The very best of observers, could we find one, would still discover that his appearances gave rise to oppositions of the kind the sceptics collect.

The three elements in Sextus’ version of this mode — position, interval, place — are present in Philo’s version also. Diogenes adds a fourth element, ‘occupants of places’, but this is hardly intelligible except as a misleading gloss on the third element. Instead of ‘intervals’ (diastēmata), Diogenes has ‘distances’ (apostēmata). (Aristocrates refers to ‘distances’ (apostēmata) too, so Diogenes’ text is unlikely to be a mere mistake or a corruption.) The ‘intervals’ in question are spatial intervals between observer and observed. The variations to which the mode appeals usually turn upon the size of the intervals, i.e. upon ‘distances’. But they do not all do so; indeed, in Sextus’ first illustration of ‘intervals’ (§118) a colonnade is said to look different from different angles, not from different distances. (The Greek for ‘colonnade’ is stoa; no doubt the Pyrrhonists found it amusing to take the example from the meeting-place of their main dogmatist opponents, the Stoics.) Thus Diogenes’ use of the word ‘distance’ is slightly inaccurate.

By the ‘position’ of an object Sextus intends its posture: the ‘position’ of a picture, or of a dove’s neck (§120), is not a matter of where it is but rather of how it is posed or arranged. As an object is, say, rotated, its appearance will alter, even though it remains, in one sense, in the same position. By the ‘place’ of an object Sextus intends to refer to its spatial context or background. Oars appear different depending on their ‘place’, that is to say on their physical surroundings: if the tide ebbs and leaves the oared boat stranded, the oars will look different, even though they remain, in one sense, in the same place.

Sextus clearly and explicitly distinguishes the three elements of the mode, dealing first with intervals (§118), then with places (§119) and
things appear to animals are all introduced as being plausible or reasonable.

It is the second case which is the more interesting, for it is connected to a very common form of sceptical argument. Someone asserts that P. A sceptic remarks: ‘But it is possible that Q—I mean, for all you know, it is actually the case that Q. And in fact, P and Q are incompatible.’ To some philosophers this form of argument has seemed shabby—why, after all, should I recant my assertion that P simply because it might be the case that Q? If it actually were the case that Q, then of course I should have to recant; but a mere possibility does not demand a recantation.

In fact, there is surely something in the sceptic’s argument. Consider the following three propositions:

(A) Sextus knows that he is in Alexandria
(B) For all Sextus knows, he is in Athens
(C) Sextus cannot be both in Alexandria and in Athens.

Surely these three propositions cannot all be true? For if (A) and (C) are both true, then (B) must be false: it is not true that for all Sextus knows, he is in Athens—he knows something, namely that he is in Alexandria, which excludes his being in Athens. And similarly, as the sceptic will argue, if (B) and (C) are true, then (A) cannot be true.

If that is correct, we can conclude that an appeal to hypothetical examples, even in the weak form of ‘It is possible, for all you know, that . . .’, may do some sceptical work.

But it will not do the particular sort of work which Sextus wants it to do. It may require us to recant a claim to knowledge, but it need not lead to our abandoning belief. For, as Sextus himself insists, we are led to abandon our beliefs by the equipollence of reasons on either side. When the Pyrrhonist claims that we cannot decide whether $x$ is $F$ or $F^*$, he does not mean merely that we cannot tell for sure: he means that nothing tips the balance one way or the other. Now such oppositions as

Grass appears green to us on earth

Grass may (for all we know) appear red on Mars

are unlikely to satisfy the requirement of equipollence. For the latter proposition, unlike the former, expresses a mere possibility: we may give it some weight—but the Pyrrhonist will find difficulty in making us give it a weight equal to that of its rival.

In short, the objection to Sextus’ use of hypothetical examples is not that they cannot in principle induce suspension of judgement. Rather, it is that, at any rate in their weak form, they are unlikely to meet the condition of equipollence.

13 Customs and Persuasions

Sextus, PH I 145–63

145 The tenth mode, which especially bears on ethics, is the one depending on lifestyles and customs and laws and belief in myth and dogmatic suppositions.

A lifestyle is a choice of a way of life or a way of acting practised by one person or many (for example, by Diogenes, or the Spartans).

146 A law is a written contract among citizens, transgressors of which are punished.

A custom or ordinary usage (there is no difference) is a common acceptance by a number of people of a certain way of acting, transgressors of which are not necessarily punished. For example, there is a law against adultery, but with us it is a custom not to have sex with a woman in public.

147 A belief in myth is an acceptance of matters that did not occur and are fictional—examples include the myths about Cronus which many people are led to credit.

A dogmatic supposition is an acceptance of a matter that seems to be established by abduction or proof of some kind, for example, that there are atomic elements of things, or homoeomeries, or least parts, or something else.

148 We oppose each of these sometimes to itself, sometimes to one of the others.

For example, we oppose custom to custom like this: some of the Ethiopians tattoo their babies, while we do not. The Persians consider it becoming to wear brightly-coloured full-length garments, while we consider it unbecoming. Indians have sex with women in public, while most other people think this shameful.

149 We oppose law to law like this: in Rome anyone who renounces his father’s property does not repay his father’s debts, but in Rhodes he does repay them in every case. Among the
Tauri in Scythia there was a law that strangers were sacrificed to Artemis, while among us killing a human at a religious rite is prohibited.

150 We oppose lifestyle to lifestyle when we oppose the lifestyle of Diogenes to that of Aristippus, or that of the Spartans to that of the Italians.

We oppose belief in myth to belief in myth when we say in one place that the mythical father of gods and men is Zeus, and in another that he is Ocean, citing

Ocean source of the gods and Tethys their mother.

[Homer, Iliad XIV 201]

151 We oppose dogmatic suppositions to one another when we say that some people declare that there is one element, other infinitely many; some that the soul is mortal, others immortal; some that human affairs are directed by divine Providence, others non-providentially.

152 We oppose custom to the others — for example to law, when we say that in Persia homosexual acts are customary, but in Rome they are forbidden by law; that among us adultery is forbidden, but among the Massagetae it is accepted by custom as indifferent* (as Eudoxus of Cnidus narrates in the first book of his Journey round the World); that among us it is forbidden to have sex with one's mother, but in Persia it is the custom to favour such marriages. In Egypt they marry their sisters, which among us is prohibited by law.

153 Custom is opposed to lifestyle: most men have sex with their own women in private, but Crates did it with Hipparchia in public. Diogenes went round in a sleeveless tunic, while we dress normally.

154 Custom is opposed to belief in myth: the myths say that Cronus ate up his own children, while with us it is the custom to provide for our children. And among us it is ordinary usage to reverence the gods as good and as unaffected by evils, while they are represented by the poets as suffering wounds and envying one another.

155 Custom is opposed to dogmatic supposition: with us it is the custom to ask for good things from the gods, while Epicurus says that the divinity pays no attention to us; and Aristippus thinks that it is indifferent whether one wears women's clothes, whereas we think this shameful.

156 We oppose lifestyle to law: although there is a law that a free man of good family may not be struck, the all-in wrestlers strike one another, because that is the style of their way of life; and gladiators kill one another for the same reason, although murder is prohibited.

157 We oppose belief in myth to lifestyle when we say that the myths say that in Omphale’s house Heracles carded wool and endured slavery

and did things which nobody would have done by choice even in moderation, whereas the style of Heracles' life was noble.

158 We oppose lifestyle to dogmatic supposition: athletes pursue glory as a good and take on for its sake a style of life full of exertion, while many philosophers hold the dogma that glory is a bad thing.

159 We oppose law to belief in myth: the poets represent the gods as committing adultery and indulging in homosexual acts, while with us the law forbids these things.

160 We oppose law to dogmatic supposition: Chrysippus says that it is indifferent whether one has sex or not with one’s mother or sister, while the law forbids this.

161 We oppose belief in myth to dogmatic supposition: the poets say that Zeus came down and had sex with mortal women, while the dogmatists consider this to be impossible; and Homer says that Zeus because of his grief for Sarpedon

poured down upon the earth bloody drops of rain

[Iliad XVI 459]

whereas it is a dogma of philosophers that the divinity is unaffected; and they deny* the myth of the centaurs, presenting the centaur to us as an example of unreality.

162 We could have taken many other examples for each of the above oppositions, but in a brief account these will suffice.

So, since so much anomaly has been shown in objects by this mode too, we shall not be able to say what each existing object is like in its nature, but only how it appears relative to a given lifestyle or law or custom, and so on. Because of this mode too, therefore, it is necessary for us to suspend judgement on the nature of external existing objects.