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1   Antecedents in early Greek philosophy

I INTRODUCTION

Scepticism was first formulated and endorsed by two different schools or groups, the Academics in the third century BC and the Pyrrhonist sceptics in the first century BC. It is, properly speaking, a product of the Hellenistic period. However, it is sometimes assumed that earlier philosophy was marked by a naïve complacency about whether knowledge is really possible. According to this view, philosophers in the classical period may have asked what knowledge is, but not whether knowledge is even possible at all.

This is mistaken for two reasons. First, earlier thinkers anticipated many of the arguments employed by Hellenistic sceptics. "Sceptical" arguments were in the air from the period of the Presocratics on, although not in the form of a well-defined position, but in the form of certain loosely related ideas and arguments. And they did not go unnoticed; the potentially destructive force of these "sceptical" arguments was appreciated by philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Democritus. Their formulation of the problems confronting the possibility of knowledge, together with their responses and attempts at defusing those problems, would inspire and anticipate many of the debates between sceptics and their opponents in the Hellenistic period.

II SCEPTICAL ARGUMENTS IN THE EARLY AND CLASSICAL GREEK PERIOD

Philosophers in the early and classical Greek period worried that knowledge might be impossible for two reasons. The first has to do with the nature of things; things might be such, in and of themselves,

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that having secure or real knowledge of them might be impossible. I will call these reasons "metaphysical," for they start with an independent characterization of how things are, and then lead to the conclusion that we may not be able to say how things are ((c) below). The second kind of reason has to do with possible limits on our abilities to think, to gather experiences and evidence, and to reason. I will call these reasons "epistemological," for they start with difficulties about our cognitive abilities and then draw conclusions about whether it is possible for us to have or acquire knowledge ((a),(b) below).

Of course, a number of these arguments appear in the service not of scepticism but of relativism, roughly, the position that nothing is anything in itself, but is just as it seems to one. Relativism incorporates a number of proto-sceptical ideas, such as an attack on the distinction between expert knowledge and mere opinion, the idea that disagreement is all-pervasive and intractable, and the idea that nothing is anything in itself, or in any sense definitely one way as opposed to another. I will discuss some of these features of relativism in (b), and compare relativism and Hellenistic scepticism in (d).

(a) Difficulties in determining how things really are

Consider the following argument: we distinguish between how things really are and how they appear to us. But unfortunately we cannot know how things really are; we are only able to say how things appear to us. Knowledge is a special achievement requiring irrefutable proof, say, which is more difficult to acquire than mere belief. Therefore, knowledge is impossible.

The premises of this argument are implicitly endorsed by various Presocratic philosophers. Many of them aspire to determine the true nature of things (e.g. the Milesians), and seem to make a distinction between reality and appearance; this is often accompanied by an exhortation to actively reason and inquire into how things are, instead of passively accepting received opinion or convention (Xenophanes, Parmenides). Sometimes this takes the form of a scornful rejection of other people's limited opinions, and an assertion that only the thinker himself has discovered the truth (e.g. Heraclitus). But some thinkers consider the possibility that it might not be

possible to know how really things are – because it is too difficult or impossible to provide proof (unnamed people referred to by Aristotle in *Posterior Analytics* 1.3), or because the evidence is beyond human capability to acquire (e.g. we can't see atoms (Democritus) or get direct evidence of what God is like (Xenophanes)), or because there is something wrong with the process by which we arrive at our beliefs (e.g. bias and prejudice, wishful thinking, anthropocentrism, etc.). That is, there may be a problem in arriving at knowledge if (i) the bar to knowledge is so high that no one can reach it; or (ii) even if it has not been set particularly high, we may be handicapped in various ways from meeting it, at least as far as we can tell from our track record so far. Once one has posited a sharp distinction between appearance and reality, it does not take much to realize that the quest for knowledge which goes beyond appearances might end in failure. Let us take a closer look at some examples.

(i) Socrates in Plato's dialogues emphasizes that to know anything about anything (e.g. whether virtue can be taught), one must first of all be able to give an account of what the thing (e.g. virtue) is. And this is not simply a matter of having linguistic competence concerning the term, say, or being able to point to examples of it; one must be able to give a general account of it, one which explains why things are like this. This turns out to be extremely difficult; we see Socrates' interlocutors repeatedly failing to be able to do it. Socrates in the *Apology* says that he thinks that the Delphic oracle pronounced him to be the wisest of all men because he alone realizes that he doesn't have knowledge. For later philosophers, especially the Academic sceptics, the Socrates of the aporetic dialogues comes to represent a properly humble attitude about one's attainment of certain knowledge.

Although, in works like the *Republic*, Plato seems to think that he can provide answers to at least some of the questions his teacher was asking, he also considers the idea that attaining knowledge might be impossible. The *Meno* investigates the sophistical puzzle about whether inquiry into X is possible, if as Socrates maintains, one does not know at all what X is (80d-e); according to this argument, one cannot search either for what one knows or for what one does not know, since in the first case there is no need to search, and in the second case, one does not know what to look for and would not recognize it if one found it. This paradox presents a problem about whether learning and teaching are possible. Plato attempted to solve

the paradox with a demonstration of successful inquiry into geometry (*Meno* 81a-86c), together with the doctrine that all learning is recollection. But the paradox continued to generate interest and responses; see, for example, Aristotle's discussion in *Posterior Analytics* 1.1 and 2.19, as well as Sextus Empiricus' arguments against the possibility of learning and teaching (*M* 1.9–38, 11.216–57, especially 237–8, with parallel passages in *PH* 3.252–73). Aristotle entertains a related challenge to the possibility of knowledge in *Posterior Analytics* 1.2-3, where he discusses someone who demands a proof for the premises used in a proof, and in turn a proof for the premises in those proofs, and so on. The problem seems to come from the generally accepted principle that all knowledge depends upon justification. Both Plato's *Meno* argument and the argument about knowledge and justification in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* raise important and troubling problems for the very possibility of knowledge, and they were taken up by Hellenistic philosophers, both those concerned to defend the possibility of knowledge, such as the Stoics and the Epicureans on the role of perceptions and conceptions as starting points for knowledge, and by those concerned to attack it, such as the Academics and the Pyrrhonist philosophers, who reformulated the problems first raised by Plato and Aristotle.

(ii) Even if one's requirements for knowledge are not particularly demanding, one might still take a dim view of our ability to meet them. Xenophanes thus points out that our representations of the gods bear a suspiciously close resemblance to our own appearances and features (DK 21B14, B15): the suggestion is, perhaps, that when we attempt to achieve knowledge about things which cannot be directly observed, we simply begin with what is familiar and tweak it. Thus, we construct little more than a fiction based on our limited perspectives and experience. One might then conclude that no matter how hard we try, we cannot get beyond our limited perspective – we cannot know what the gods are really like. As Xenophanes says:

And the clear truth no man has seen nor will anyone know concerning the gods and about all the things of which I speak; for even if he should actually manage to say what was indeed the case, nevertheless he himself does not know it; but belief [*dokos*] is found over all. (Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.49 = DK 21B34)

In passages like these, Xenophanes seems to cast doubt on the possibility of knowledge about things beyond the reach of direct observation.

Democritus comes even closer to concluding that knowledge is impossible because of limitations to our epistemic powers. In many places in his writings he seems to reject any possibility of knowledge whatsoever (*M* 7.135). But Sextus Empiricus emphasizes that, in these passages, Democritus is in fact specifically attacking the senses, though he thinks this has the consequence of removing all knowledge (*M* 7.137). What was the basis for Democritus' attack on the senses? Theophrastus tells us that Democritus had an extensive theory of the senses and sensible qualities, according to which what the senses perceive is not atoms in themselves, but the *effect* of aggregates of atoms on the sense-organs (*De Sensibus* 60–1, 63–4).[1] Thus, for example, when I smell and see a cup of coffee in front of me, what I perceive is not the atoms of the cup of coffee, but rather the effect produced by the atoms coming from the cup of coffee on my nasal passages, mouth, and eyes. As far as the senses go, "We in reality have no reliable understanding, but one which changes in accordance with the state of the body and of the things which penetrate and collide with us" [= DK 68B9]. If the senses are the "yardstick" for reality, then "By this yardstick man must know that he is cut off from reality" [= DK 68B6]. Democritus thinks that "this argument too shows that in reality we know nothing about anything, but each person's opinion is something which flows in [or 'is a reshaping']" [= DK 68B7]. For what the senses tell us is not how things really are, only how we have been affected at any given time by the atoms which flow into our sense organs.

Democritus attacks the senses as a source of knowledge, therefore, because what they detect are not, as we would say, objective qualities of objects but their relational properties – properties they only possess relative to perceivers, such as appearing red or sweet or loud. The real nature of things lies in their material constitution, i.e. atoms and void. But one can only find out the truth about these by means of reason, since atoms and void cannot be seen or touched. Hence, the senses cannot grasp the true nature of things.

One might then go on to reject the testimony of the senses entirely. But Democritus does not. Instead, he famously has the senses reply to the attack by means of a self-refutation argument, as Galen reports:

Who does not know that the greatest confusion of any reasoning lies in its conflict with what is evident? If someone cannot even make a start except

from something evident, how can he be relied on when he attacks his very starting-point? Democritus was aware of this; when he was attacking the appearances with the words "By convention colour, by convention sweet, by convention bitter, but in reality atoms and void" he made the senses reply to thought as follows: "Wretched mind, you get your evidence from us, and yet you overthrow us? The overthrow is a fall for you" [= B125]. (Galen, *On Medical Experience* (Walzer [326]), p. 114 = 179c Taylor [27], trans. Frede and Taylor)

Even if the senses are limited in what they can tell us, rejecting them entirely is not an option, because reason itself depends on the evidence of the senses. That is, reason is not a cognitive faculty entirely independent from the reports of the senses. Reasoning begins with what the senses tell us about the world, and then proceeds, by means of inference to the best explanation, to theories about how things really are.

In sum, Democritus argues as follows:

(1) All knowledge is based on perception; without the senses, knowledge is impossible.

(2) Perception should be rejected because it only tells us about the subjective properties of things, not their intrinsic objective properties.

(3) Therefore, knowledge is impossible.

But since he thinks that knowledge *is* possible (Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.139 = DK 68B11), he rejects (2), by insisting upon the evidentiary value of perception: even if it doesn't tell one how things really are, still it does provide us with the starting points for further inquiry without which knowledge would be impossible.

Much depends, of course, on supposing that Democritus intends to reject (2), thereby avoiding the sceptical implications of this argument. If, however, one thought that Democritus recommends both premises (1) and (2) above, then the conclusion, that knowledge is impossible, seems inevitable. According to this reading, Democritus is committed to the thesis that the senses' testimony is worthless, and since he is also committed to the thesis that no knowledge is possible without the senses, it follows for him that knowledge is impossible.[2] This presents a darker epistemic outlook, one which proved to be of considerable use to the sceptics in developing their critiques of positive theories of knowledge (even though Sextus does

not count Democritus as a sceptic, *PH* 1.213–14). For whether or not Democritus himself endorsed the premises of the argument above, he offers an argumentative strategy to any would-be sceptic against all forms of empiricism. Since premise (1), the thesis that all knowledge depends on perception, was pretty much taken for granted in the Hellenistic period, this meant that Hellenistic philosophers developing theories of knowledge had to contend with various forms of Democritus' objection used by the Academic and Pyrrhonist sceptics against them.

Even if Democritus himself did not accept the sceptical implications of his argument, at least one of Democritus' followers, Metrodorus of Chios, apparently did, when he said at the beginning of his book *On Nature* "None of us knows anything, not even this, whether we know or we do not know; nor do we know what to not know or to know are, nor on the whole, whether anything is or is not" (Cicero, *Acad.* 2.73 = DK 70B1; see also Sextus, *M* 7.48, 87–8; Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.19.9).[3] Unfortunately we do not have enough context for this remark in Metrodorus; one reason for caution is the fact that he seems otherwise to have held solidly to the tenets of atomism (DK 70A3), and all of the other fragments and testimony for Metrodorus seem to be robustly dogmatic pronouncements about the nature of reality. Even so, this opening line from Metrodorus' book shows, first, that sceptical ideas were in the air, very likely prompted by Democritus' books on knowledge and the senses. Secondly, Metrodorus' sceptical ideas – whatever form they took exactly – show a certain refinement and sophistication, indicating awareness of the problem of inconsistency and containing careful qualification of the thesis that "no one knows anything" by adding "not even this."

(b) Variability and conflicting appearances

Let us now take a look at a special kind of epistemological worry concerning knowledge. Consider the following argument: things appear both F and not-F (e.g. the wine appears sweet to some and not to others, capital punishment appears just to some and not to others). But there is no good basis for deciding that one appearance is correct rather than another. For any possible method of deciding either begs the question, or is open to objection. For example, should one decide by majority vote? Should we say that things are as they

appear to most people? Surely it is possible that everyone besides a few might be ill, deranged, or somehow unreliable in judgement. Similar arguments could be made against any other method of deciding in favor of one judgement rather than another. This argument-pattern is epistemological; it starts from the supposed fact that perceptions and opinions on any matter vary widely, and ends with the conclusion that there is no non-biased non-arbitrary method for adjudicating these disputes.

The two principal moves in the argument – examples of conflicting appearances together with an undecidability argument – would later become the principal stock-in-trade of the Pyrrhonist sceptics. They are enshrined in the so-called Ten Modes of Aenesidemus, the collection of argument-types attributed to Aenesidemus, and found in Diogenes Laertius' and Sextus Empiricus' reports of Pyrrhonist scepticism. There, the argument ends with the result that one cannot make up one's mind, that one must or cannot help but suspend judgement. This frame of mind is compared to one's attitude towards the question of whether the number of stars is odd or even. But in the classical period, the argument does not end with scepticism and suspension of judgement. It is rather an argument-pattern used (at least in the extant texts of the fifth and early fourth centuries BC) to support Protagorean relativism.

Both Plato and Aristotle attribute to Protagoras the use of conflicting appearances to argue for the thesis that things are for each as they appear to each (Plato, *Theaetetus* 152b10) or that "all appearances are true" (*Metaphyiscs* 4.5, 1009a8). "Now doesn't it sometimes happen that when the same wind is blowing, one of us feels cold and the other not? Or that one of us feels rather cold and the other very cold? … Well then, in that case are we going to say that the wind itself, by itself, is cold or not cold? Or shall we listen to Protagoras, and say it is cold for the one who feels cold, and for the other, not cold?" (*Theaetetus* 152b). Protagoras' answer is, evidently, that we should say that the wind is cold if it seems so to one, and hot if it seems so to one; that is, the wind is not anything, hot or cold, in itself. As Aristotle puts it, "Which, then, of these impressions are true and which are false is not obvious; for the one set is no more true than the other, but both are alike" (*Metaphysics* 4.5, 1009b9–11). We are supposed to draw this conclusion from cases of perceptual conflict between two individual perceivers, conflict between the perceptions

of different species of animals, and even conflict between the perceptions for a single individual (*Theaetetus* 154a3–8; cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.5, 1009b2–12, 1010b3–9). The examples of conflicting appearances in Plato and Aristotle's discussions of Protagorean relativism are probably among the original sources for the first mode of Aenesidemus (variations in appearances between humans and other animals, see Sextus Empiricus, *PH* 1.40–78), the second (variations in appearances between humans, *PH* 1.79–90), the third (variations in appearances between senses, *PH* 1.91–99), the fourth (variations in appearances owing to circumstances, *PH* 1.100–17) and the fifth mode (variations in appearances owing to positions, distances, and locations, *PH* 1.118–23).[4]

In the *Theaetetus*, Plato presents the undecidability argument separately as a response to a potential objection to Protagoras' claim that things are for each as they appear to each (158b8-e4). The objection is that the beliefs of the madman or the dreamer are obviously false; surely these are not "true for them" (157e1–158b8). But Socrates tells us that, far from refuting Protagoras' claim, these are the very sorts of examples which Protagoreans embrace. For they argue that since each party to a dispute has equal conviction about how things really are, there is no more reason to think that things are as they appear for the waking person than that they are as they appear for the dreamer. For example, we are awake and asleep for equal periods of time, and while asleep we are convinced of the truth of our dream-thoughts whereas while we are awake we are equally convinced of our waking thoughts. Of course, in the case of disease and madmen, the times may not be equal – but then "Are we going to fix the limits of truth by the clock?" (158d11–12). Plato's version of this argument (which is perhaps the earliest extant statement of the undecidability argument, but which he seems to expect to be familiar to his readers (158b)) makes it clear that the argument is meant to undermine any attempt to insist that some appearances are obviously false. It does so by placing the burden of argument on the opponent to show that there is some non-arbitrary way of deciding which ones are true and which ones are false. We are left to infer that any attempt to mark off some appearances as false would inspire a similar response: one could only do this legitimately by establishing the existence of some kind of norm or standard by which to decide this question. Aristotle makes this explicit in his version of the argument: any

attempt to establish a principle for deciding can be met "by asking, who is the judge of the healthy man, and in general who is likely to judge rightly on each class of questions" (*Metaphysics* 4.6, 1011a3–6). This type of argument fits what we know of Protagoras' *Truth*, which seems to have been in part an attack on those who try to put themselves forward as authorities; Protagoras demonstrates in his *Truth* the methods one can use to undermine any claims to authority and expertise.[5]

Thus, even though the conflicting appearances and undecidability argument were used in the classical period in the service of relativism, not scepticism, they still raise problems for the possibility of knowledge, especially expert knowledge. For they undermine one's confidence that we can tell for any given question which answer is true and which is false, on the assumption that the true answer must be true to the exclusion of the other (which would be the assumption of anyone aspiring to expert knowledge). In general, these arguments attempt to shift the burden of argument onto one who wishes to maintain that knowledge and false thinking are possible.

(c) Contradictionism, flux, and indeterminacy

Consider now the following argument-pattern. We distinguish between how things really are and how they appear; as usual, knowledge is only of the former. But if we assume that something is really F only when it is F invariably and without qualification, that is, only when it is not in any way or to any degree not-F, we open the door to the possibility that nothing is really F: perhaps everything is both F and not-F (let us call this "contradictionism"), or everything is always changing from F to not-F ("flux"), or nothing is any more F ("*ou mallon*") or is determinately F to any greater extent than it is not-F.[6] If then all of nature is fundamentally indeterminate, and nothing that exists has a definite nature, then it will be impossible to say how things are, since any attempt to do so will vainly try to pin things down as being one way rather than another.

This argument for the impossibility of knowledge is based on metaphysical claims about how things are. It has its roots in early Greek speculative metaphysics. Contradictionism and flux are associated with Heraclitus when he says, for example, that "the road up

and the road down are one and the same" (DK 22B60) or that "we step and do not step into the same rivers, we are and we are not" (DK 22B49a; see also 22B10, 22B61). Now Heraclitus himself does not draw the conclusion that things are unknowable; indeed, in many fragments, he speaks of wisdom and understanding as available to anyone who listens to his account of the truth (e.g. DK 22B114, 22B1, 22B2, 22B35). But Heraclitus' pithy and memorable sayings lend themselves to different interpretations. Thus, in the *Theaetetus*, Plato has Socrates attribute contradictionism and flux to him – and to most of his predecessors besides Parmenides (152de). Socrates goes on to argue that this ultimately implies that knowledge is impossible. Roughly, he shows that the "Heraclitean" doctrine implies that *anything* which is F will also be not-F (181d–183b). This in turn shows that the theory cannot support Protagoras' doctrine or Theaetetus' definition of knowledge according to which knowledge is perception, because it turns out that if it makes someone's percep- tion that x is F true, it also makes it false, since it tells us that F-ness itself is changing and that perceiving is also not-perceiving. Indeed, it seems to make language impossible (183b). A proponent of extreme contradictionism and flux is effectively rendered speechless, since there is nothing that one can truthfully say about anything. Socrates' conclusion is that if flux and contradictionism are true, then lan- guage, thought, and knowledge are impossible. Of course, although Plato intends this to be a refutation of extreme flux and contradic- tionism, it might in fact be something that a die-hard contradictionist or flux theorist is willing to embrace.

Aristotle too thinks that the theses of contradictionism and flux lead people to conclude that knowledge is impossible, or at least convince them to give up looking for it. For the thesis that everything is in flux seems to imply that nothing is assertible, as follows:

And again, because they see all this world of nature is in movement, and that about that which changes no true statement can be made, they say that of course, regarding that which everywhere in every respect is changing, noth- ing can truly be affirmed. It was this belief that blossomed into the most extreme of the views above mentioned, that of the professed Heracliteans, such as was held by Cratylus, who finally did not think it right to say any- thing but only moved his finger, and criticized Heraclitus for saying that it is impossible to step twice into the same river; for *he* thought one could not do it even once. (*Metaphysics* 4.5, 1010a7–15[7])

The idea of flux, taken to an extreme, leads Cratylus to the conclusion that "nothing can be affirmed of anything":

And at the same time our discussion with him is evidently about nothing at all; for he says nothing. For he says neither "yes" nor "no," but both "yes" and "no"; and again he denies both of these and says "neither yes nor no"; for otherwise there would already be something definite. (*Metaphysics* 4.4, 1008a31–4)

This then leads people to give up searching for knowledge, according to Aristotle:

And it is in this direction that the consequences are most difficult. For if those who have seen most of such truth as is possible for us (and these are those who seek and love it most) – if these have such opinions and express these views about the truth, is it not natural that beginners in philosophy should lose heart? For to seek the truth would be to follow flying game. (*Metaphysics* 4.5, 1009b33–1010a1)

The "most difficult consequence" of such views is that one may be led to conclude that the search for truth is futile. Here we have one of the clearest reports in pre-Hellenistic philosophy of the sceptical predicament, of the idea that though one may search for truth, it may not be possible to find it.

Aristotle offers the following diagnosis for the predicament:

The reason why these thinkers held this opinion [namely, that knowledge is impossible] is that while they were inquiring into the truth of that which is, they thought "that which is" was identical with the sensible world; in this, however, there is largely present the nature of the indeterminate – of that which exists in the peculiar sense which we have explained [sc. being characterized by opposites]; and therefore, while they speak plausibly, they do not say what is true. (1010a1–5)

As Aristotle makes clear, the sceptical conclusion does not result from epistemological worries about our capacity to know and inquire. Rather, it results from the idea that the nature of reality is indeterminate, which makes it impossible to assert anything truly about anything. What reduces Cratylus to simply moving his finger is the notion that nothing can be said correctly about the world, and hence that it is better to say nothing at all.

Plato himself is associated with the position that things in the sensible realm are both F and not-F. In the *Republic* (475d–480a), he

has Socrates argue for the existence of Forms as a condition for the possibility of knowledge precisely because, if the Forms did not exist, then since the sensible world is characterized by radical indeterminacy (where nothing has pure being but is "rolling around as intermediates between what is not and what purely is" (479d)) nothing can be known. For if none of the things in the sensible world are determinately F as opposed to not-F, they cannot tell us what it is to be F, as opposed to not-F. Thus, someone who does not acknowledge the existence of Forms can only have belief, not knowledge. By contrast, the Forms are what they are stably and determinately, and so they can be objects of knowledge.

Thus far, we have seen hints or explicit statements of contradictionism and flux in Heraclitus and in Plato. Plato and Aristotle, who are our main sources for these ideas, bring out explicitly the fact that these ideas are a threat to the possibility of knowledge. But there are also a number of thinkers from the fourth century BC, not mentioned by Plato or Aristotle, who may have endorsed some version of the indeterminacy argument for scepticism, including Anaxarchus of Abdera and, most famously, Pyrrho.[8]

Anaxarchus and Pyrrho were said by ancient doxographers to belong to "the school of Democritus"; this was probably based on little more than the fact that they came from the same area of Greece as Democritus and they seem to have been influenced by or connected with him in some way. According to some interpretations, Pyrrho espoused the indeterminacy of nature:[9]

[Timon] says that [Pyrrho] reveals that things are equally indifferent and unstable and indeterminate; for this reason neither our sensations nor our opinions tell the truth or lie. For this reason, then, we should not trust them, but should be without opinions and without inclinations and without wavering, saying about each single thing that it no more is than is not or both is and is not or neither is nor is not. (Aristocles in Eusebius 14.18.1–5 = LS 1F, trans. Bett [143], p. 16)

Pyrrho seems to begin with the thought that "things are equally indifferent and unstable and indeterminate," that is, with the thesis of indeterminacy and flux. We cannot specify why exactly he felt reality was indeterminate, but he does go on to conclude that nothing is assertible in such a way as to exclude the opposite or contradictory proposition, and that "neither our sensations nor our

opinions tell the truth or lie" because nothing is one way any more than any other.[10]

We are told by Sextus that Anaxarchus, along with the Cynic Monimus, "likened existing things to stage-painting and took them to be similar to the things which strike us while asleep or insane" (*M* 7.88). Some have compared this to the sceptical arguments of Descartes' First Meditation, where we are confronted with the possibility that our experiences may be dream states, or states of a madman.[11] Others, however, argue that Anaxarchus is not talking about our experiences at all, but rather comparing *existing things* with stage-paintings and dreams.[12] He is not then saying that our perceptions and beliefs are like dreams in being unrepresentative and false, but rather that things in the world are, like *trompe l'oeil* decorations, not what they present themselves as being. This would not then be an epistemological argument, but rather the expression of the consequences of a certain metaphysical view.[13]

(d) Proto-sceptical arguments in the classical period

In sum, there can be found in early and classical Greek philosophy two types of considerations, epistemological and metaphysical, which lead to the conclusion that knowledge is difficult or impossible. But one should not suppose that any of these ideas constitutes full-blown scepticism, for two reasons. First, the position that knowledge is impossible is not a position that anyone explicitly adopts in the texts we have been considering. For example, Aristotle, who opposes such ideas, does not think that anyone would be happy to conclude that nothing can be known; indeed, he doesn't actually think of it as a philosophical position at all. If one has been led, by some course of reasoning, to the conclusion that it is impossible to have knowledge, or that the search for it is inevitably fruitless, then he thinks that gives one good reason to re-examine the assumptions that led one to this idea in the first place. That would change in the Hellenistic period.

Secondly, Hellenistic sceptical arguments lead to *epochê*, or suspension of judgement – including on the very question whether knowledge is possible – whereas these arguments end in various specific, positive conclusions, making them "dogmatic" in Hellenistic terms. Many of the arguments we have been looking at first appear in the

service of relativism – the position Plato develops on Protagoras' behalf in the *Theaetetus*. The two positions are distinct, of course; the sceptic confines himself to suspending judgement about how things really are, whereas the relativist concludes that things are simply as they appear to each, and cheerfully maintains that we know lots of things, although of course we have to give up claims about how things are determinately and in themselves. However, these two positions are still related. First, relativism, like Pyrrhonian scepticism, starts from the idea that disagreement is all-pervasive, and argues that it is intractable. On both views, it is supposed that things appear F to some and not-F to others, and that there is no principled way to decide which are correct and which are mistaken.

Secondly, relativism amounts to a denial that there is any meaningful distinction to be made between how things appear and how things are. Things only have properties relative to thinkers and perceivers. By contrast, scepticism takes for granted the distinction itself, and then suspends judgement about how things are – not about there being any such thing as how things really are, but simply about how things really are. What these positions have in common is the dim prospects for rational inquiry; on both views, further inquiry into how things really are is futile and pointless.

Thirdly, relativism is often summarized by the slogan "everything is relative," meaning that nothing is F in itself, but is only F relative to someone to whom it appears F. This bears some resemblance to the position later adopted by the Pyrrhonists that one can only say how things appear to one, not how they are in themselves.[14] This, together with the fact that the Pyrrhonists happily took over the conflicting appearance arguments used by Protagoras, leads to some conflation of relativist and sceptical arguments in the later Pyrrhonist tradition.[15]

III ARGUMENTS AGAINST SCEPTICAL IDEAS IN THE CLASSICAL PERIOD

The sceptical ideas and arguments discussed in the previous section did not go unremarked in the classical period; indeed, we know of some of them only because they were criticized by philosophers who understood the threat they posed to the possibility of objective knowledge. Of course, these philosophers did not expressly recognize these ideas as constituting "scepticism," as that term was later used

in the Hellenistic period. But their objections to these ideas were well-known to later self-proclaimed sceptics who recognized that they deserved a reply in turn. Plato's and Aristotle's arguments against these proto-sceptical ideas were thus an important impetus for the development of Hellenistic scepticism.

Five important objections to various ideas we have considered so far were formulated by Plato and Aristotle. First, Plato argues in the *Theaetetus* 169d3–171e9 that these positions are self-refuting and lead to problems of consistency.[16] This highlights, for the sceptics, the need to avoid inconsistency in general, and self-refutation in particular (though some sceptics, such as Sextus at *M* 8.480–1, may instead have embraced self-refutation as congenial to the sceptical stance). Secondly, Aristotle argues that there are numerous logical and metaphysical reasons for rejecting contradictionism (*Metaphysics* 4.5, 1009a30–38). I will not focus on these two arguments because they are less directly connected to Hellenistic scepticism. More significant are the following three objections they raise. (1) Plato and Aristotle argue that if contradictions are true together, then language and thought are impossible. (2) Aristotle raises numerous objections to the undecidability argument, most important of which is the so-called "inactivity" argument. (3) Aristotle defends the possibility of knowledge based on the nature of proof and demonstration. Let us now take a closer look at these three arguments.

(a) The inassertibility objection

At *Theaetetus* 181a–183b Plato explores the implications of extreme instability and contradictionism, and concludes that it will be impossible to assert of anything that it is anything, and that language will become impossible, except perhaps for the thoroughly non-committal expression *oud' houtôs*, roughly "not at all thus" (183b4). Aristotle makes the same point when he argues, in support of the principle of non-contradiction, that someone who embraces contradictionism – someone who really thinks that for every x, x is always both F and not-F – cannot be speaking, or thinking, anything at all:

If all are alike both right and wrong, one who believes this can neither speak nor say anything intelligible; for he says at the same time both "yes" and "no." And if he makes no judgement but thinks and does not think,

indifferently, what difference will there be between him and the plants? (*Metaphysics* 4.4, 1008b7–12)

Someone who genuinely thinks that for all p, both p and not-p is not asserting anything, let alone expressing a belief.

Of course, as we noted earlier, one might refuse to see this as a refutation, and instead view it as the natural and inevitable result of one's inquiries into nature. Aristotle thinks Cratylus is ridiculous, but others might view his predicament more sympathetically. Indeed, later Greek sceptics regard as highly defensible the idea that one might have nothing positive to assert.

(b) The inactivity argument and other objections to the undecidability argument

Aristotle argues that no one really believes that things are equally F and not-F. "For why does a man walk to Megara and not stay at home thinking he ought to walk? Why does he not walk early some morning into a well or over a precipice, if one happens to be in his way? Why do we observe him guarding against this, evidently not thinking that falling in is alike good and not good? Evidently he judges one thing to be better and another worse" (*Metaphysics* 4.4, 1008b14–19). A person may claim that for all p, both p and not-p, but Aristotle thinks his actions show that he does think that something is the case, and not the contradictory as well.

Aristotle's objection is equally effective against any position that maintains that, for all p, there is no more reason to think that p is true than that not-p is true. Aristotle thinks we do not really put equal weight on conflicting appearances, that we are not unable to decide what color things are or what their magnitudes are, that we prefer judgements made up close over those made from far off, that we prefer judgements made by those who are awake over those made by dreamers. He says, referring to people in general, that "obviously they do not think these to be open questions" – meaning, that no one is really unable to decide which one is correct and which is not correct. Thus, one who is in Libya but imagines being in Athens one night does not thereupon immediately set out for the Odeum, because he does not put equal weight on every thought that occurs to him (*Metaphysics* 4.5, 1010b3–11).

The inactivity argument raises a problem for anyone who makes use of the undecidability argument, whether he be a contradiction-ist, Protagoras, or a would-be sceptic. Aristotle says, referring to Heraclitus, that just because someone says something doesn't mean that he really believes it (*Metaphysics* 4.3, 1005b25); the same could be said of anyone who says, for all *p*, that there is no more reason to believe *p* than not-*p*. This is the sort of objection that presumably gave rise to the apocryphal stories concerning Pyrrho, that he had to be prevented by his friends from walking into the paths of oncoming carts or walking off precipices – stories that simply make vivid Aristotle's objection to the undecidability argument. For it puts pressure on the would-be sceptic to explain how it is possible to live his scepticism.

The undecidability argument is also attacked by Plato and Aristotle by means of the "argument from the future." In the *Theaetetus* (177c–179c), Plato argues that the expert and the ignorant man are not equally correct in their predictions about whether a person will get well or not, contrary to Protagoras, who endorses the undecidability argument that there is no reason to prefer any one opinion over another. That is, they may be correct in their judgements about the present – Plato is willing to grant that to Protagoras, at least for the moment. But when it comes to judgements about what is good or useful, and what will prove to be so in the future, Socrates argues that not all opinions are equally authoritative. For example, if asked whether a certain drug will pro-duce health in a certain kind of patient, a doctor is more likely to be correct than someone who is ignorant of medicine; an expert orator will be more authoritative than a novice about what is persuasive to an audience (179ab; see also Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.5, 1010b11–14). This argument works against Protagoras, as long as he admits that events confirm which prediction comes true, that of the expert vs. that of the layman. Because Plato and Aristotle's attacks on the unde-cidability argument and their defense of the idea of expert knowledge are so forceful, it is not surprising that Hellenistic sceptics were con-cerned to offer some kind of reply. Thus, there is a strand of argument in Sextus of challenging the notion of an expert and the correlative notions of teaching and learning in general (see *M* 1.9–38, *M* 11.216–57, and parallel passages in *PH* 3.252–73).

Finally, Aristotle draws upon his own theory of perception in order to argue that conflict between perceptions *can* be decided, because

not all perceptions are equally authoritative (*Metaphysics* 4.5, 1010b1–9). First of all, though he thinks that perception of the proper objects of the senses (such as colors, smells, sounds) is always (or usually) true, this does not mean that all perceptual beliefs are true, since for Aristotle there is a difference between a perception and a judgement or belief based on that perception. Secondly, each sense is authoritative about its own proper objects (sight is authoritative about colors), and so there can be no real conflict between the senses. And one sense cannot conflict with itself, since perceptions will be of objects at a particular time and place. It never happens that a single sense-modality will make conflicting reports about the same thing at the same time. Thus, there is no reason to think that conflicting perceptions are all-pervasive and can never be resolved; in many cases, it will be quite obvious that one perception is correct and the other is mistaken. However, Aristotle doesn't take seriously enough the possibility that in other cases, disagreement may be irresolvable. The First and Second Pyrrhonist Modes collect examples of things which may appear one way (say, bitter and intolerable) to humans and another way (say, pleasant and drinkable) to animals or to a different set of humans – often disagreements reflecting genuine physiological differences in constitution – where there does not appear to be any non-arbitrary or meaningful way to settle the question. In such cases, disagreement may signal a difficulty about the property being disagreed about, such as sensible qualities and value properties, suggesting that these properties may be relational, not intrinsic properties of the things that bear them.

(c) Who should be the judge?

Aristotle's confidence that there is no disagreement or conflict between opinions that cannot be decided can seem blindly optimistic, or even "dogmatic" in the usual sense of the word. The proponent of the undecidability argument tries to make this apparent by insisting on a proof or further argument establishing who can determine which side is correct and which is incorrect.

In *Metaphysics* 4.6, Aristotle is fully aware that his opponent will make this move:

There are, both among those who have these convictions and among those who merely profess these views, some who raise a difficulty by asking, who is the judge of the healthy man, and in general who is likely to judge rightly on each class of questions. But such inquiries are like puzzling over the question whether we are now asleep or awake. And all such questions have the same meaning. These people demand that a reason shall be given for everything; for they seek a starting-point, and they seek to get this by demonstration, while it is obvious from their actions that they have no conviction. But their mistake is what we have stated it to be; they seek a reason for things for which no reason can be given; for the starting-point of demonstration is not a demonstration. (*Metaphysics* 4.6, 1011a3–13)

The argument from his opponent which Aristotle is summarizing is clearly intended to make difficulties for his earlier claim that no one is really puzzled about conflicting appearances, that we prefer the healthy person's judgements over that of the sick person, waking experiences over dreams. Aristotle says that such questions are part of a general class of questions asking "who is likely to judge rightly on each class of questions?" Such questions are meant to neutralize one's natural preference for the opinions of experts and authorities by raising doubts about whether we can tell who is an expert and who has the authority to judge. In general, if you say "we prefer the beliefs of X to those of Y," the would-be sceptic will undermine whatever grounds you have for preferring X to Y by asking either for some kind of proof that X *is* more authoritative than Y, or some infallible criterion by which you can determine who is right and who is wrong.

This type of objection attempts to block an appeal to ordinary notions of authority (e.g. one should ask a doctor) or ordinary means for deciding questions (e.g. one should go and look for oneself), and to demand that one produce some further principle for showing who or what has the authority to judge or to decide. The Pyrrhonist sceptics later incorporate these objections into the Five Agrippan Modes. Aristotle correctly sees that the issue is not simply about how you can tell whether you are awake or dreaming, or whether you can tell who is sick and who is healthy. The real issue is much bigger; it is, as T. Irwin puts it, "whether we are justified in believing p only if we can prove p by appeal to some further principle q that we are justified in believing independently of p."[17] If the sceptic can succeed in getting you to sign on to this conception of justification, the game is over for you, for any further principle q which you might produce will itself

require further justification. And as Aristotle sees in *Posterior Analytics* 1.3, this leads to the specter of an infinite regress of justification, or a vicious circle.[18] The real issue is thus about what it is to ask for justification or for a demonstration, and when sufficient justification or demonstration has been given. For this reason, Aristotle says that what is needed is not the proof his opponent demands – the proof of who should be regarded as an authority and judge – but, rather, careful consideration of what requires proof and what does not.[19] Thus, his own treatment of demonstration in the *Posterior Analytics* begins with this question, and identifies a number of ways in which one could fail to understand what it is to ask for a demonstration, by demanding a proof for what should be regarded as the starting point. The details of his answer to these questions belong to another discussion. But we can see at least in outline Aristotle's response to the would-be sceptic: the very idea of demonstration or justification presupposes the idea of a starting point, something which does not itself require justification. If one recognizes this, and understands what method should be used to identify those starting points, one will see that one should reject the universal applicability of the undecidability argument and other strategies designed to get us to doubt whether we can ever say anything without justification. It is surely not an accident that the Five Modes of Agrippa attempt to continue the debate by taking over many of the proto-sceptical arguments Aristotle puts in the mouths of his unnamed opponents and responds to in the *Posterior Analytics*.[20]

IV CONCLUSION

Sceptical ideas and arguments were familiar to philosophers in the classical Greek period. But virtually no one during this period deliberately embraced the position that nothing can be known, or argued for suspension of judgement on all matters. And no one opposing these ideas thought that their starting point had to be the refutation of sceptical ideas. Epistemology during this period does not start, as it has for some philosophers in the modern period, with the problem of scepticism, for example, scepticism about the external world.

This would change in the Hellenistic period with two important developments. First, Epicurus introduced a theory of the criterion of truth, which formally endorsed the Democritean idea that all

knowledge is based on perception. Epicurus couched this in terms of an innovative framework, that of an infallible criterion of truth which determines what is true by itself being true; this in turn would attract attention from detractors who tried to show that nothing can be a criterion of truth in this sense.[21] Secondly, the Academic and Pyrrhonist sceptics embraced scepticism as a viable position. The need to reply to the objections raised by Plato and Aristotle in the earlier period proved to be a stimulating challenge for these later philosophers – one that is partly responsible for the character and shape of scepticism in Hellenistic philosophy.

NOTES

1   See Taylor [27], Lee [134], pp. 181–250, esp. pp. 200–16.
2   Or one might conclude that one can only know how one has been affected, not what the causes of those affections are; so the Cyrenaics argue, arguably in agreement with Democritean worries about knowledge. For discussion, see Tsouna [139].
3   The text of the Metrodorus fragment is corrupt, and the precise form of the Greek is unclear; see Brunschwig [126].
4   For a comparison of Aristotle's treatment of these arguments with the Aenesideman modes, see Long [135].
5   For further discussion, see Lee [134], pp. 8–29. In the Hellenistic period, debates about knowledge were cast in terms of responses to the question, what is the criterion of truth?; sceptics would deny that any conclusive answer could be found (see Striker [119]).
6   This is not, of course, how the slogan *ou mallon* is used when it becomes a catchphrase of the Pyrrhonists; see Pierre Pellegrin, Chapter 6 "Sextus Empiricus" (especially n.19 and accompanying text).
7   Translations of passages from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* are by W. D. Ross, rev. J. Barnes, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation* (J. Barnes (ed.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), with occasional modifications.
8   Xeniades of Corinth may also have endorsed this argument. According to Sextus, he "said that everything was false, that every impression and opinion is false, and that everything which comes to be comes to be from what is not and everything which is destroyed is destroyed into what is not" (*M* 7.53, see also *PH* 2.76; cf. Brunschwig [127]).
9   See Bett [143], p. 117, for discussion and further references.
10   For further discussion (from a partially differing point of view), see Svavar Svavarsson, Chapter 2 "Pyrrho and Early Pyrrhonism."

11 See Hankinson [68], pp. 54–55, Burnyeat [129].

12 Bett [143], p. 162.

13 Another possibility is that Anaxarchus is expressing a detached attitude toward life rather than a kind of epistemological scepticism. The same can perhaps be said of the Cynic Monimus, to whom Sextus also attributes the "stage-painting" remark; Monimus may have been commenting on the vanity of things and of human life. This would certainly be consistent with the Cynics' repudiation of theoretical inquiry in philosophy (DL 6.103).

14 For contrasting views on the significance of relativity in Pyrrhonism, see R. J. Hankinson, Chapter 5 "Aenesidemus and the Rebirth of Pyrrhonism" and Paul Woodruff, Chapter 11 "The Pyrrhonian Modes."

15 Sextus Empiricus, *PH* 1.38–39, 135–40, 177, 3.232.

16 The details of the argument are controversial; see the classic paper Burnyeat [128], with some criticisms by Fine ([131], [132]) and Sedley's development of an improved Burnyeat-style interpretation (Sedley [136], pp. 57–62).

17 Irwin [133], p. 194.

18 See Barnes [55], p. 106, Barnes [124], Barnes [125], Barnes [270].

19 *Metaphysics* 4.4, 1006a5–11, where Aristotle presumably has in mind his discussion of proof at *Posterior Analytics* 1.2–3.

20 See further Paul Woodruff, Chapter 11 "The Pyrrhonian Modes."

21 For more on Epicurus, see Striker [118], Taylor [138].