

History of Philosophy A: Lecture Ten

1. What is scepticism?

Like most philosophical tropes, it all starts with the Greeks. The word was its etymological roots in the Greek for 'weighing up'/'deliberating'. So sceptics are those who are continually in the process of weighing up the sides of an argument. Most importantly, they fail to come down on either side. So 'philosophical sceptics' are a bit different from the normal use of the word. So, essentially, a sceptic is one who refuses to believe propositions. One can be a sceptic with regards to only *some* areas but not others. So you might be a sceptic with regards to moral beliefs; or religious beliefs; or sensory beliefs etc. The more you are sceptical about, the more extreme your scepticism.

Pyrrhonist Scepticism

Originally it was intended as a way of life; a moral theory guiding action. Pyrrho of Elis was the first famous sceptic. Pyrrho's scepticism is just one type. He was of the opinion that belief should be *withheld*. That is, for any particular matter you care for, you should withhold belief over it.

- 'The earth is round'
- 'I am lecturing to first years'
- 'There's a cliff there – you should be careful'

So the set up for Pyrrhonism it's a bit like this. Imagine that you are involved in a debate. Side A says some reasons to believe some given position. Side B says some reasons *not* to believe that position. The Pyrrhonist says that, in light of the fact that there are pros and cons, you should leave it there. That is, you shouldn't *endorse* the position nor endorse that it is false

Academic Scepticism

Not only was there Pyrrhonism, there was a stronger type of scepticism that developed later. It was called Academic Scepticism, and arose in the third century. It originated with Arcesilaus (~316 - ~242 BC).

Academic Scepticism goes further than Pyrrhonism. It says that we don't know anything at all. Including that statement! So it isn't just the idea that we should withhold belief, but that we actively can't know anything. There's a difference there – and perhaps the difference between the two means things one position is susceptible to, the other isn't. The Academic Sceptic says that the best you can do is say that such things are 'probable' or 'what is like truth'. So you can't *know* that $2+2=4$, but you can say that $2+2=4$ is probable. So whilst you can't *know* that it is true, you can *act* as if it were true *because* it's 'probable'.

2. Why Be A Sceptic?

Reason One: Scepticism as a lifestyle choice

Pyrrhonism and Academic Scepticism were both proposed as key to a happy lifestyle. By never endorsing anything, you never find yourself in trouble. For instance, they were moral sceptics. So when you moved somewhere you adopted their lifestyle because there was no reason to think it was wrong. The sceptics led a multi-cultural, tolerant lifestyle, which disposed them towards happiness.

Reason Two: Epistemological Arguments

It was a common trope amongst the Greeks that the only road to knowledge was by deductive inferences. That is, you started with self-evident propositions and deductively moved from there to secure knowledge about the world. Some sceptics simply denied that there were any principles that were self-evident. If there were no self-evident principles, there'd be nothing to deduce knowledge from. So you wouldn't know anything (and some variety of scepticism would be true).

Reason Three: Cicero's Argument

This is in the reading. Take a debate between various sides. So one guy says P. The sceptic says 'Ooo, I don't know. Maybe P. Maybe not P.' Everyone else, in not being a sceptic, says 'Not P.' So that one guy will think the sceptic wrong, but *prefer* the sceptic's answer to everyone else's. So in every case where someone believes P, they'll always believe the sceptic is second best even though wrong. But this generalises: *everyone* will think the others wrong, but *everyone* will think the sceptic second-best.

Now think of it like a vote. The sceptic will *always* come second. But no-one will *always* come first (that is, for any proponent he'll think himself first, but all his opponents will reckon he's worse than the sceptic). As the sceptic consistently comes second, he's better overall. So he's right.

There are other reasons! We'll look at more next semester when we turn to HPB. For the rest of this lecture we'll discuss what's *wrong* with scepticism.

3. Problems With (Global) Scepticism

Recall the various (example) areas you could be a sceptic about. The problem with *these* versions of scepticism is that they are *global* sceptics. That is, they are sceptics about *everything*. This generates a general problem: if you don't know *anything* then you can't know that you don't know anything. So you can't claim to know that scepticism is true. It's *self-refuting*. This is an ancient problem with scepticism. So, unsurprisingly, the global sceptics have *something* to say in response.

Back to Augustine

Augustine argues against scepticism in the extract. I'll leave it to you to read, but we'll (briefly) cover the content.

The sceptics seemed to say that there could be someone who was wise. But their wise man didn't *know* anything – he had the wisdom to not claim such a thing. Augustine and his mates spend a large portion of the extract concentrating on this idea. If the wise man doesn't know anything, how can he be *wise*? And if he does know things, then doesn't that mean scepticism is false!

The devil, as always, is in the details. A close reading of the extract will pay dividends. As will careful attention being paid to Alypius' response that the sceptics might wish to use. In other words: you need to come away with something more than the basic argument I just gave.

4. Brief Notes On Exams

What's on it?

90 minute exam, jointly examined with History of Philosophy B. Two sections, one on History of Philosophy A and one on History of Philosophy B. The questions will cover only the second part of the course.

There will be three questions. So covering the arguments for the existence of God and the two forms of scepticism we've looked at today. Questions will be relatively specific.

For example

Not 'Does God exist or not?'

Rather 'What is Gaunilo's objection to Anselm's ontological argument?'

Not 'So, do you reckon we can avoid scepticism?'

Rather 'Evaluate Cicero's argument for Academic Scepticism.'

Whilst specific, there are only a small number of topics that are covered. So if you revise 3/4 question answers, you'll be on a winner.

How do you prepare?

So if the question was: 'What is Gaunilo's objection to Anselm's ontological argument?' Being able to regurgitate what Gaunilo says won't get you very far. Being able to give a Gaunilo-esque objection to Anselm would get you a 2:2. Being able to respond to those objections (say, relying on further reading, or things you've discussed in seminars) will be going deeper, and push you into the 2:1 area.

Criticisms of that get you into the 1st. Write them as you would an essay: the exam requires essay-style answers. That means forming *an argument*. That means *going beyond the lecture material for a good mark*. Don't have to revise them word for word. And the mark you receive for an exam answer will always be higher than it would've for an essay.

So, if you've been keeping up with the reading, and made notes, you should be able to produce 3 exam answers of a 2:2-ish standard almost immediately. If you've done the extra reading (remember doing extra reading was factored into the work you were meant be doing each week!) then you should be able to produce an answer of a 2:1/1st standard.

If you wait until two days before the exam to write these exam answers, you're a moron.

WRITE THEM NOW!