

THE LIFE OF SEXTUS EMPIRICUS

1. INTRODUCTION

Sextus Empiricus does not reveal anything of himself as distinct from 'the Sceptic' except in a passing and incidental way. He does not refer to his contemporaries, nor to his country, nor to any personal experiences, in such a way as to provide a definite picture of his life and times. The few references he makes to his involvement in the medical profession are as perplexing as they are enlightening. The only attachments which Sextus strongly identifies with in his extant writings are the demands of the Pyrrhonian philosophy.

The present paper indicates the most important evidence that one can draw upon for determining the details of Sextus' life, and critically examines this evidence and some interpretations others have given it. This has not been done since the turn of the century.¹ As a result of a lack of attention to this evidence, there is a tendency to allow mere conjectures or probabilities to be treated as facts which ultimately influence the interpretation of Sextus' thought.

2. DATES

Scholars usually place Sextus late in the second century A.D.² It is argued that by the third century A.D. Stoicism had ceased to be the sort of influential power which would provoke such an impassioned polemic as one finds Sextus involved in. Stoicism, they argue, is attacked by Sextus as being the dominant corrupting force of the day. This argument has played a decisive role not only in determining when Sextus lived but also where he taught.

The passage which scholars call upon to prove that the Stoics of Sextus' own time were his chief opponents occurs at *P.H.* i. 65.³ Before quoting this passage it is important to define clearly what the matter at issue is. No one would dispute the fact that Sextus considered the Stoics to be the chief opponents of the Sceptics. What requires demonstration is that the Stoics whom he is attacking are his contemporaries. The fact that he is attacking Stoicism does not by itself show that he is living at a time when Stoicism is flourishing. A large part of Sextus' writings consists of impassioned attacks on the Pre-Socratics, who,

¹ W. Vollgraff, 'La vie de Sextus Empiricus', *Revue de Philologie* (1902), pp. 195–210.

² Patrick, Pappenheim, Haas, Brochard, Zeller, Goedeckemeyer, and dal Pra place Sextus late in the second century. F. Kudlien (*Rb. Mus.* 106 (1963), 253 ff.) places Sextus around A.D. 100. Vollgraff (p. 201) argues that Sextus was head of the Pyrrhonian School from A.D. 115 to 135. Vollgraff's thesis has been adequately demolished by Brochard and need not detain us.

³ E. Pappenheim, *Lebensverhältnisse des*

Sextus Empiricus (Berlin 1887) p. 13; M. M. Patrick, *Sextus Empiricus and Greek Scepticism* (Cambridge, 1899), pp. 8, 10, 14, 20; V. Brochard, *Les Sceptiques grecs* (2nd edn. Paris, 1932, repr. Paris, 1959), pp. 314–15; M. Haas, *Leben des Sextus Empiricus* (Burbhausen, 1882), p. 15; A. Goedeckemeyer, *Die Geschichte des griechischen Skeptizismus* (Leipzig, 1905, repr. Darmstadt, 1968), pp. 266₂, 274; E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen* (5th edn., ed. E. Wellman, Leipzig, 1923), iii. 2. 10, 49; M. dal Pra, *Lo Scetticismo greco* (Milan, 1950), pp. 373 ff.

obviously, were not flourishing at the time he wrote.⁴

Was Sextus writing from the standpoint of one caught up in a spirited polemic with contemporary Stoics? Or, was Sextus presenting the position of Pyrrhonism against Dogmatism from the standpoint of one whose attention is not so much focused on a contemporary controversy as directed towards the problem which the Pyrrhoneans had been involved in for centuries? This question is made particularly difficult to answer by the fact that it was a common practice amongst later Greek philosophers not to mention their contemporaries regardless of their relation to them.

P.H. i. 65. occurs as a part of Sextus' outline of the Stoic theory of *logos*, and more particularly of internal reason (*ἐνδιάθετος*) which he ridicules at length in the paragraphs that follow. *ἴδωμεν οὖν πρότερον περὶ τοῦ ἐνδιαθέτου. οὗτος τοῖνυν κατὰ τοὺς μάλιστα ἡμῖν ἀντιδοξοῦντας νῦν δογματικούς, τοὺς ἀπὸ τῆς στοᾶς, ἐν τούτοις ἔοικε σαλεύειν . . .*⁵ R. G. Bury's translation: '... according to those Dogmatists who are, at present, our chief opponents—I mean the Stoics. . .'⁶ Does the 'νῦν' indicate that the Stoics Sextus has in mind are 'the present day Stoics'? Or, does the 'νῦν' rather indicate that the Stoics are 'at present' (i.e. as regards the question presently under discussion) the chief opponents of the Pyrrhoneans?⁷

The discussion which proceeds *P.H.* i. 65 is against the Dogmatists generally. *P.H.* i. 65 marks the point where Sextus moves to consider a specific matter, in which the Stoics in particular, since the time of Chrysippus, have maintained the position which Sextus presently opposes. The fact that the Stoics are said to be presently the Sceptics' chief opponents does not tell us very much about the state of Stoicism in Sextus' day. Sextus could reasonably have said that Chrysippus represented in the past and still represents *at present* the main opponent of the Sceptics. It is important to note that the Stoics who said that internal reason is occupied with the matters indicated by Sextus in *P.H.* i. 65 were originally the Stoics from the Early Stoa.⁸ The Stoics of his day would have followed in their tradition and thus repeated these views. The Stoic Sextus specifies by name in the attack that follows is Chrysippus.⁹ He speaks of Chrysippus as though he were living in the present though he does refer to him as the old one (*ὁ ἀρχαῖος*) when he quotes him.

One might reasonably imagine Sextus having before him as he lectures the texts of the Dogmatists from the Early and Middle Stoa while the contemporary Stoics whom he confronts in his daily life are but faint shadows of the Stoics we find him addressing by name in his works. His contemporary Stoics would be his main opponents in that they are a part of the tradition Pyrrhonism is most strongly opposed to.

P.H. i. 65, however one might translate it, does not reveal very much about the state of Stoicism in Sextus' day. It is remarkable that such an obscure and

⁴ Sextus Empiricus' polemical treatises all begin with a survey of the dogmas, which have been asserted by the poets and philosophers throughout the ages, which are relevant to the topic which he proposes to study. He does not treat them in chronological order. Sextus Empiricus appears to be solely concerned with the fact that they

were dogmatists.

⁵ *P. H.* i. 65.

⁶ Bury's translation reflects the ambiguity of the νῦν.

⁷ See *P. H.* i. 69 ff.

⁸ *P. H.* i. 69.

⁹ *P. H.* i. 69.

nondescript passage is the best testimony that scholars can call upon to prove that Sextus was deeply immersed in a polemic with his contemporaries.

If one maintains that Sextus is referring to contemporary Stoics in *P.H.* i. 65 it still does not follow that he was necessarily writing in the second half of the second century A.D. Porphyry quotes the preface to Longinus' book, 'Επιγράφεται δὲ τὸ βιβλίον Λογγίνου πρὸς Πλωτῖνον καὶ Γεντιλιανὸν Ἀμέλιον Ἐπερὶ τέλους', in which Longinus says that there were many Stoics about 'when I was a boy' who were distinguished men in their day.¹⁰ Longinus' dates are c. A.D. 213–73. If Sextus was referring to his contemporaries in *P.H.* i. 65 he could quite reasonably have been thinking of the Stoics Longinus mentions who lived during the first half of the third century A.D.

Sextus' arguments generally are not explicitly directed against his contemporary Stoics. The Stoics he names and the theories he examines are from the Early and Middle Stoa. His reference to Basilides the Stoic (*M.* viii. 258), which was once taken to be the Basilides who taught Marcus Aurelius, is more likely to refer to the Basilides mentioned in a fragment of Diogenes Laertius.¹¹ Aenesidemus is the only other author named in *M.* vii. –xi. who could have lived later than the middle of the last century B.C. His dates are uncertain.¹²

Sextus' attack is directed against all Dogmatism for all time. Each of his polemical treatises begins with a survey of the views which have been expressed on the matter in question from Homer onwards. His attacks on Epicurus are as impassioned as his attacks on any Stoic.¹³ It is only with respect to logic that the Stoics are given special attention. This is as one would expect since the Stoics were the most prominent logicians. Even if Stoicism had been completely extinct, which, of course, it was not, Sextus would have still regarded it as absolutely necessary to refute their position in order to establish exhaustively the need to practise ἐποχή.

Sextus may have lived at a time when Stoicism was flourishing. However, one cannot determine this from the way in which he addresses the Stoics.

If the dates of Diogenes Laertius could be determined with certainty the most decisive evidence one could call upon in trying to date Sextus would be the following reference Diogenes makes to the otherwise unheard of Saturninus: Σέξτου δὲ δῆκουσε Σατορνῖνος ὁ Κυθηνῆς, ἐμπειρικὸς καὶ αὐτός.¹⁴ Unfortunately, we neither know when Saturninus lived nor how long the gap was between Saturninus and Diogenes. Beyond this Diogenes' dates are at least as difficult to determine as are Sextus'.

¹⁰ Porphyry, *Life*, 20–70.

¹¹ 'Les historiens insistent, pour fixer la date de Sextus, sur ce fait qu'il nomme le stoicien Basilides (*M.* viii. 258), qu'on regarde généralement comme un des maîtres de Marc-Aurèle. Mais Zeller a montré qu'il s'agit peut-être ici d'un autre Basilides, compris dans la liste des vingt stoiciens dont un fragment de Diogène, récemment publié par Val. Rose (*Hermès*, i. 370, Berlin, 1866), nous fait connaître les noms. Au surplus, quand il serait acquis par là que Sextus est postérieur

à Marc-Aurèle, ce fait ne jetterait pas une grande lumière sur l'époque précise de sa vie.' Brochard, p. 315.

¹² Zeller, p. 104. Patrick (p. 9) notes that Zeller accepted the view that Basilides was identical with one of the teachers of Marcus Aurelius in the second edition of the above mentioned work but rejected this view in the third edition of the same work.

¹³ See *M.* i. 1–6.

¹⁴ *D. L.* ix. 116.

Galen of Pergamum frequently speaks of an Herodotus whom certain scholars identify with the Herodotus whom Diogenes Laertius says was the teacher of Sextus.¹⁵ However, Galen never makes a mention of Sextus despite the fact that he discusses in great detail both the Methodical and the Empirical Medical Sects and names all those involved of any importance. Galen also speaks of the Sceptics in sufficient detail that he would have mentioned Sextus if he had known of him. M. M. Patrick concludes:

As Galen died about 200 A.D. at the age seventy, we should fix the date of Sextus early in the third century, and that of Diogenes perhaps a little later than the middle, were it not that early in the third century the Stoics began to decline in influence, and could hardly have excited the warmth of animosity displayed by Sextus.¹⁶

If one is not convinced by the argument that Sextus must have written at a time when Stoicism was flourishing, the evidence points to the early part of the third century A.D.¹⁷ If one accepts this argument one might place Sextus late in the second century and either assume 'that the climax of his public career was reached after Galen had finished those of his writings which are still extant',¹⁸ or suppose that for some reason Sextus was unknown to Galen even though they were contemporaneous with each other.

F. Kudlien proposes another possibility:

... wenn wir nämlich annehmen, dass sein Lehrer Herodot der gleichnamige Arzt gewesen ist, welcher seinerseits Sohn eines empirischen Arztes und Schüler des empirisch-skeptischen Arztphilosophen Menodot aus Nikomedien sowie des Arztes Agathinos war. Sextus würde dann vielleicht ebenfalls noch in trajanische Zeit oder, allgemeiner gesprochen, in die Zeit um 100 n. Chr. gehören.¹⁹

His thesis is dependent upon establishing that the Herodotus, whom Galen speaks of, is the Herodotus whom Diogenes Laertius mentions. Diogenes provides the following information: 'Μηροδότου δὲ Ἡρόδοτος Ἀριέως Ταρσεύς· Ἡροδότου δὲ διήκουσε Σέξτος ὁ ἐμπειρικὸς, οὗ καὶ τὰ δέκα τῶν Σκεπτικῶν καὶ ἄλλα κάλλιστα'.²⁰ Galen does not speak of Herodotus as the son of Arieus, from Tarsus, the pupil of the empiric physician Menodotus, nor does he indicate that he taught Sextus. The only factor which connects Sextus with this Herodotus is that they were both physicians. Galen's Herodotus belonged to the Pneumatic Medical Sect and was a pupil of Agathinus.²¹ Sextus clearly did not

¹⁵ Kudlien (pp. 252 ff.), Goedeckemeyer (p. 266), Patrick (p. 9), Zeller (p. 10), and Brochard (p. 315) take the view that the Herodotus whom Diogenes (D. L. ix. 116) mentions was the Herodotus mentioned by Galen (see Zeller, pp. 31 and 104). Dal Pra (p. 367) and Robin, *Pyrrhon et le scepticisme grec*, (Paris, 1944), p. 197, disagree with them. The evidence which Galen gives on the relation of the Pyrrhoneans to the Medical Sects is scattered throughout his works. Zeller and Brochard provide the most detailed discussion of this evidence. They do not deal with this evidence separately but rather they introduce it into their discussions of the particular Sceptics. Kudlien has introduced new evidence which is considered on p. 231.

¹⁶ Patrick, p. 10.

¹⁷ 'Dass Sextus vor 220 gelebt hat, ergibt sich daraus, dass Hippolytus ihn in seiner zwischen 220 und 230 verfassten Widerlegung der Haeresien benutzt hat ...' Goedeckemeyer, p. 262. H. Chadwick, in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2nd edn. 1970), fixes Hippolytus' dates as c. A.D. 170–236. The evidence, which Goedeckemeyer cites, would at least indicate that Sextus lived before A.D. 236.

¹⁸ Patrick, p. 10.

¹⁹ Kudlien, p. 253.

²⁰ D. L. ix. 116.

²¹ See Zeller, p. 50 n. 1 continued from p. 49.

belong to the Pneumatic Sect and does not make any mention of that Sect in his extant works. He was either an Empirical or Methodical Doctor.²² Diogenes does not say Herodotus was a medical doctor.

Kudlien maintains that the Arieus whom Diogenes mentions as the father of Herodotus is the Arieus to whom Dioscorides Pedanius dedicated his *Materia medica*.²³ Dioscorides lived under Claudius and Nero (A.D. 41–68). If one assumes that Arieus lived near the time when the dedication was made it is possible that he could have been the father of the Herodotus, mentioned by Galen, who lived in the Flavian period (A.D. 70–96). The only evidence which even vaguely connects this Arieus with Galen's Herodotus is that the former was a pharmacologist while the latter was a physician. That this Arieus is the father of Herodotus, at best, is possible. Kudlien says that the fact that Galen makes no reference to Sextus does not necessarily imply that Sextus had to have lived after Galen.²⁴ In the absence of any strong evidence Kudlien's thesis must be accepted with the others as possible rather than probable. Galen's failure to mention Sextus, at least, appears as an unlikely omission on his part had he written during or after the time of Sextus.

The evidence, in fact, is of such a nature that one cannot do any more than set a limit on the possible dates of Sextus which range from A.D. 100 to the first part of the third century.

3. PLACE

It is not possible to determine where Sextus was born. In the *Suda* there is a mention of a Sextus of Chaeronia and a Sextus of Libya.²⁵ The reference indicates that they were both Sceptics and that the Sextus of Chaeronia was the author of the writings of Sextus Empiricus. Because the *Suda* is notoriously unreliable, this evidence has not been given much importance by most scholars.²⁶ But Haas maintains that this testimony is too precise and consistent with the internal evidence to be dismissed.²⁷ There is only one reference to Chaeronia in the whole of the extant writings of Sextus.²⁸

No evidence would give any other choice strong support.²⁹ Sextus' knowledge of any one country does not stand out in a way that would justify identifying it as his home land. He shows a detailed knowledge of the peculiar practices and

²² See pp. 235 ff.

²³ Kudlien, pp. 252 ff.

²⁴ Kudlien, p. 252.

²⁵ *Suda* or *Suidas*, Lexicon, ed. I. Bekker (Berlin, 1854).

²⁶ 'Wenn Suid. IIb, 714 Bernh. in seine Angaben über den . . . besprochenen Sextus aus Chaeronea, den Neffen Plutarch's solche über Sextus Empir. und dessen Schriften einmenget, einen Theil der letzteren aber (die 3 uns erhaltenen) Sp. 715 auch wieder einem Σέξτρος Λίβυος beilegt, so beweist diess, wie längst bemerkt worden ist, lediglich, dass in diesem Fall, wie bei Suid. öfters, verschiedene Artikel durch einander

gerathen sind.' Zeller, p. 50 n. 1 continued from p. 49. See Brochard, p. 316.

²⁷ Haas, p. 6. Vollgraff also believes the *Suda* to be accurate. Vollgraff's article is of interest as an illustration of what crazy constructions one must propose to make a case for the evidence of the *Suda*.

²⁸ *M.* i. 295.

²⁹ It has been argued that Libya is given special attention of the sort that would suggest it was Sextus Empiricus' home land. See Patrick, p. 11. However, the evidence to support this view is too weak to merit serious consideration.

traits of Egypt,³⁰ Libya,³¹ Athens,³² Alexandria,³³ and Rome,³⁴ which he could have acquired from travelling or living in these places or from some written source. He writes from the indifferent standpoint of a spectator when he discusses the different cultural traits.

M. M. Patrick, in her book *Sextus Empiricus and Greek Scepticism*, has presented an exhaustive discussion on the question of where the Sceptical School was located when Sextus taught.³⁵ It should be said before considering Patrick's position that it may be quite inaccurate to speak so formally in terms of an organized school. A part of the difficulty in locating the Pyrrhonean School may be that it consisted of little more than one individual and whatever following he may have acquired. Thus, the 'school', if it should be called that, may have not had any fixed location or organization apart from its teaching itself. Scholars tend to treat the Pyrrhoneans as being far more of an organized sect than the evidence would justify. The present study follows Patrick's analysis closely though it raises doubts about the conclusions she reaches.

It is not possible to determine with certainty where the Pyrrhoneans taught prior to or after Aenesidemus. Aristocles, the Peripatetic, says that Aenesidemus taught in Alexandria. *If the Pyrrhonean tradition had a definite centre* prior to and after Aenesidemus, Alexandria would seem the most probable location.³⁶ However, Sextus indicates that he is teaching at some place other than Alexandria or than Athens when he is presenting his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.³⁷ Further, he says that he is teaching where his master taught.³⁸ It would appear that the 'School' was moved from Alexandria during or before the time of Sextus' teacher.

Where was the 'School' moved to? Pappenheim believes that the Pyrrhoneans moved to some unknown city in the East. He notes that there are frequent references to Pyrrhonism and to Sextus in Greek literature but that Sextus is never mentioned in Roman writings. It is difficult to imagine what Roman texts Pappenheim thinks one should expect to find Sextus mentioned in. Further he argues that it would have been idiotic of Sextus to move the 'School' to Rome where Stoicism had the favour of the Emperors.³⁹

Haas, on the other hand, argues that the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* were delivered in Rome. His argument for Rome is primarily based upon a study of the references Sextus makes to Rome and to the Romans.⁴⁰ He argues that Sextus

³⁰ *P.H.* i. 83; *M.* xi. 15, 16; *P.H.* iii. 202, 205.

³¹ *P.H.* i. 84; *P.H.* iii. 224; *M.* viii. 147; *M.* ii. 105.

³² *P.H.* ii. 98; *M.* viii. 145; *P.H.* iii. 24; *M.* ix. 368; *M.* i. 87; *M.* i. 148; *M.* i. 228; *M.* i. 246; *M.* ii. 22, 35, 77; *M.* vi. 14.

³³ *P.H.* ii. 221; *M.* x. 15, 95.

³⁴ *P.H.* i. 149, 152; *P.H.* iii. 211; *M.* i. 218.

³⁵ Patrick, pp. 12–21.

³⁶ Euseb. *Praep. Evang.*, xiv, xviii, 29.

³⁷ *P.H.* ii. 98 and *M.* viii. 145 (Athens); *P.H.* iii. 221 (Alexandria). The evidence as regards Athens is weak. All he says is that Athens is not in his line of vision at the moment that he lectures. Whether his view of Athens is simply blocked because he is in

a room or not is not made clear.

³⁸ *P.H.* iii. 120.

³⁹ E. Pappenheim, *Der Sitz der Schule der griechischen Skeptiker*, (Berlin, 1887), p. 4.

⁴⁰ See *P.H.* i. 152; *P.H.* iii. 211, 214. οἷον νόμῳ μὲν, ὅταν λέγωμεν παρὰ μὲν Πέρσαις ἔθος εἶναι ἀρρενομιξίας χρῆσθαι, παρὰ δὲ Ῥωμαίοις ἀπαγορεύεσθαι νόμῳ τοῦτο πράττειν, καὶ παρ' ἡμῖν μὲν τὸ μοιχεύειν ἀπειρῆσθαι . . . Haas argues that παρ' ἡμῖν is referring back to παρὰ δὲ Ῥωμαίοις. The statement goes on: . . . παρὰ δὲ Μασσαγέταις ἀδιαφορίας ἔθει παραδεδῶσθαι ὥς Εὐδοξὸς ὁ Κνίδιος ἱστορεῖ . . . *P.H.* i. 152. This evidence is very weak. It could equally well be used to show that Sextus Empiricus was teaching in Persia!

never opposes Rome to where he is speaking from and that the definition of law⁴¹ and the particular laws Sextus identifies with are Roman.⁴² Also he maintains that once Alexandria and Athens are ruled out, Rome is the only remaining location where there was sufficient Stoic influence to provoke Sextus, and an adequate library to account for the many references he makes to other texts. Haas identifies the Herodotus, who Galen says taught in Rome, with the Herodotus who Diogenes Laertius says was Sextus' teacher.⁴³

Patrick asserts against Zeller that Sextus could not have been quoting from other books when presenting information about the customs of Alexandria and Rome but that he must have been reflecting upon the personal experience of having lived in these places. She offers no argument for this but takes it to be obvious though Zeller and Pappenheim saw the matter quite differently.⁴⁴ There is not any definite evidence which would rule out the possibility that Sextus is copying from another text though one must agree with Patrick that Sextus seems to be able to call upon this knowledge of these peoples' customs at will as though it were 'his knowledge'. However, it is far from evident that he would actually have had to live in these places in order to acquire a knowledge of them. One would expect an ancient Sceptic to make a special effort to be versed in as wide a range of conventions as possible in order to be able to show that what is taken to be a law of nature is merely an arbitrary contrivance.

Patrick accepts Haas's hypothesis that the Herodotus, whom Galen speaks of, is the Herodotus, whom Diogenes Laertius mentions.⁴⁵ If one is ready to accept with Patrick and Haas that Galen's Herodotus is the Herodotus Diogenes mentions and if one is further prepared to suppose that Herodotus taught only in Rome, for which there is no solid evidence, it follows that Sextus taught in Rome since he says that he taught where his teacher taught.

Patrick notes that Sextus refers to Asclepiades by name ten times in his extant writings.⁴⁶ Asclepiades had made Rome one of the centres of the medical profession. This fact does 'speak in favour of Rome' but it certainly cannot be regarded as strong evidence. There can be little doubt that the medical school in Alexandria would have been very interested in and informed about the activities and doctors of the school in Rome.

With Haas, she asserts as obvious that he must have written the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* in one of the centres of Stoicism.⁴⁷ Since Alexandria and Athens are ruled out, only Rome is left. 'May we not then conclude, that Sextus was at the head of the school in Rome for a short time . . . but that he also taught in Alexandria, where the real home of the school was certainly found?'⁴⁸ No. The evidence is too inconclusive to admit of such a definite conclusion. Sextus may have presented his *Hypotheseis* in Rome as Haas maintains or he may have gone

⁴¹ νόμος δ' ἐστὶν ἔγγραφος συνθήκη
παρὰ τοῖς πολιτευομένοις, ἣν ὁ παραβαίνων
κολάζεται . . . *P.H.* i. 146.

⁴² Haas does not attempt to show that the laws Sextus identifies with would not conform with the Greek laws also. Were he to argue this he would find himself in great difficulty because Sextus does not speak of laws which are curiously provincial. In the late second century the general laws of Greece and Rome

were almost identical.

⁴³ Haas, pp. 14 and 15;

⁴⁴ Patrick, p. 18.

⁴⁵ Patrick, p. 20. See pp. 8 ff.

⁴⁶ Patrick, p. 20. See *P.H.* iii. 32; *M.* vii. 91, 202, 323, 380; *M.* viii. 7, 188, 220; *M.* ix. 363; *M.* x. 318.

⁴⁷ Patrick, p. 21.

⁴⁸ Patrick, p. 21.

to some unknown city in the East as Pappenheim argues. The testimony supporting either proposal is at best suggestive.

4. PROFESSION

Certain interpreters have attached a great deal of significance to the fact that Sextus was a physician. They have regarded the Scepticism of Sextus as having the function of serving as a kind of prolegomena to the positive research of the empirical sciences.⁴⁹ Thus the association of the Pyrrhoneans with the Empirical Medical Sect has been emphasized. It is, therefore, also important to look at how Sextus regarded the medical sects and spoke of them in regard to Scepticism and himself. To do this it is necessary not only to look at what Sextus said but also the context in which he said what he said. If there was a close working relationship between Sextus the Sceptic, and Sextus the medical practitioner and researcher, one would expect some indication of it in his extant writings.

That Sextus was a physician can be established from the following internal evidence. In an argument in which Sextus is showing that it is only the experts in each particular art, and not the dialecticians, who are able to refute sophisms of the kind that would be useful to expose, he gives a medical example. In giving this example Sextus changes, in one clause, from using the third person to the first person plural.⁵⁰ The only other internal evidence that reveals that Sextus was a medical doctor is his mention of Asclepius, the hero and God of healing, as τὸν ἀρχηγὸν ἡμῶν τῆς ἐπιστήμης.⁵¹ Sextus' reference to Asclepius appears in the context of an example which illustrates the point that historians are not to be trusted because they invent facts about historical personages. These are the only two texts in which Sextus directly identifies himself as a physician.

In the context of a discussion, in which the various views concerning the criterion are being considered, the views of Asclepiades, the physician, come up. Sextus says that there is no need to consider Asclepiades' views in the present work because he has been considered ἐν τοῖς ἰατρικοῖς ὑπομνήμασι.⁵² On another occasion, Sextus makes a reference to what might be the same medical treatise in a lecture concerned with defining γραμματική. He refers to an argument which he had made ἐν τοῖς ἐμπειρικοῖς ὑπομνήμασι concerning the use of the terms ἐμπειρία and τέχνη.⁵³ Sextus' medical writings are no longer extant. Apart from what might be surmised from the above two references, nothing is known of their contents.

Sextus makes an abundant use of technical medical examples in illustrating his arguments. However, it must be said that his esoteric knowledge of a number

⁴⁹ Brochard argues that Aenesidemus and his successors were purely interested in the negative end of destroying dogmatism and put nothing in place of the standpoint they destroyed. He then contrasts the period of Menodotus and Sextus with their predecessors as follows: 'Les sceptiques de la dernière période sont des médecins: s'il veulent aussi, et de la même manière, détruire le dogmatisme ou la philosophie, c'est pour la remplacer par l'art, fondé sur l'observation, par la médecine, c'est-à-dire par une sorte de

science.' p. 310. Patrick maintains that the ancient Sceptics '... advocated a spirit of progress—the forever seeking. The seeking of the Pyrrhonists was in the direction of scientific research, particularly of empirical or inductive research.' M. M. Patrick, *The Greek Sceptics*, (New York, 1929). p. 285.

⁵⁰ *P.H.* ii. 238.

⁵¹ *M.* i. 260.

⁵² *M.* vii. 202.

⁵³ *M.* i. 61.

of other subjects is in evidence throughout his treatises.⁵⁴ Sextus freely draws upon any fact that may serve to aid his argument, whether it be that the Ethiopians tattoo their children,⁵⁵ or that the sufferer from a headache finds myrrh unpleasant.⁵⁶ In illustrating his arguments, Sextus never explicitly makes any mention of his own experiences as a physician; nor does he ever directly identify himself with any particular medical sect when he comments on their methods and findings.⁵⁷

Most scholars maintain that Sextus was a member of the Empirical Medical Sect.⁵⁸ It is worth examining in some detail the three passages in which Sextus actually comments on the medical sects in order to see whether there is any internal evidence to support the view that he had this attachment.⁵⁹

The final division of book one of Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* consists of six chapters in which the six philosophic standpoints or sects most closely connected with Scepticism are distinguished from it.⁶⁰ In the last of these chapters Sextus considers the medical sect which is called Empiricism.⁶¹ This chapter is the only extant text in which the question, concerning which medical sect the Sceptics might appropriately belong to, is directly raised.

Ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ τῇ ἐμπειρίᾳ τῇ κατὰ τὴν ἰατρικὴν αἰρέσει τὴν αὐτὴν λέγουσι τινες εἶναι τὴν σκεπτικὴν φιλοσοφίαν, γνωστὸν ὅτι εἴπερ ἡ ἐμπειρία ἐκείνη περὶ τῆς ἀκαταληψίας τῶν ἀδῆλων διαβεβαιούται, οὔτε ἡ αὐτὴ ἐστὶ τῇ σκέψει οὔτε ἁρμόζοι ἂν τῷ σκεπτικῷ τὴν αἵρεσιν ἐκείνην ἀναλαμβάνειν, μᾶλλον δὲ τὴν καλουμένην μέθοδον, ὡς ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ, δύναιτο ἂν μετέιναι.⁶²

R. G. Bury translates 'τὴν αἵρεσιν ἐκείνην' as 'that doctrine'. This is a misleading rendering because it might give the impression that Sextus is saying that the Sceptic should not embrace that particular doctrine (περὶ τῆς ἀκαταληψίας τῶν ἀδῆλων) while he is still leaving the possibility that one could attach oneself to the Empirical Medical Sect. The word αἵρεσις is not used to mean this or that doctrine within a body of doctrines but rather means 'system of philosophic principles, or those who profess such principles, sect, school'. Τὴν αἵρεσιν ἐκείνην refers back to ἡ ἐμπειρία ἐκείνη which in turn refers back to τῇ ἐμπειρίᾳ τῇ κατὰ τὴν ἰατρικὴν αἰρέσει.⁶³

Sextus indicates that he is arguing against an opinion which is actually held by certain people. One can only guess at who these people may have been. Patrick suggests that there may have been a division in the Pyrrhonian School over its relation to the Medical Sect, which could have been the reason why the

⁵⁴ Perhaps this is most obviously displayed in his discussion of the ten tropes. *P.H.* i. 40–169.

⁵⁵ *P.H.* i. 148.

⁵⁶ *P.H.* ii. 52.

⁵⁷ Sextus does not relate personal information about himself as regards any aspect of his life. However, he writes from the standpoint of a Pyrrhonian and does not ever speak as a member of the Medical Sect.

⁵⁸ Brochard, p. 317; P. Natorp, *Forschungen zur Geschichte des Erkenntnis Problems im Altertum* (Berlin, 1884), p. 155; Patrick, p. 9, believes that Sextus was, at least, an Empirical Doctor for the first part of his life and that he may have belonged to the Methodic

Sect later on. Zeller, p. 50, continued from n. 1, p. 49, says that Sextus' view may have altered under the influence of Pyrrhonism but that he remained an Empirical Doctor.

⁵⁹ *P.H.* i. 236–41; *M.* ii. 326–328; *M.* viii. 191.

⁶⁰ *P.H.* i. 210–41, chs. xxix–xxxiv.

⁶¹ *P.H.* i. 236–91, ch. xxxiv.

⁶² *P.H.* i. 236.

⁶³ Natorp, p. 157, thinks that Sextus is only criticizing a particular doctrine of the Empirical School in its theory of knowledge but is not condemning the School at large. He says that it is only a minor philosophical difference not concerned with medical practice.

Pyrrhonian School was moved from Alexandria. In refuting the opinion which those people had, Sextus is not content with merely indicating the theoretical difference between the epistemological standpoint of the Empiricism of the Medical Sect and the Sceptical Philosophy. He explicitly states the practical consequences of the Empirics' rash dogmatism upon the individual Sceptic who may be contemplating joining the Empirical Medical Sect. 'It would not be appropriate for the Sceptic to attach himself to that sect.'⁶⁴

Without making any definite qualifications Sextus argues, in some detail, that the Methodic Sect embraces the Sceptical standpoint in its theory and practice.⁶⁵ He concludes that the Methodic Sect is more akin to Scepticism than any other medical sect.⁶⁶ However, Sextus does not identify himself, as distinct from 'the Sceptic', with any particular sect in this discussion.

On another occasion, Sextus repeats his distinction between the Empirical Sect and Scepticism.⁶⁷ In order to show that *ἀπόδειξις* is non-evident by showing that it is in dispute he indicates the conflict of opinion between the Dogmatic philosophers and logical physicians who affirm it, the Empirical doctors who deny it, and the Sceptics who cautiously suspend judgement.

The only other passage⁶⁸ in which Sextus comments on the Medical Sects is one in which the interpreters say that he is contradicting the position which he expressed in the two passages discussed above.⁶⁹ It is argued that in *M.* viii. 191 Sextus is classing the Sceptics and Empiricists together in a way which contradicts his statements in *P.H.* i. 236 and *M.* viii. 327 and 328 where he is maintaining that they hold conflicting positions.⁷⁰

Sextus writes:

εἰ δὲ καταληπτὰ, πάλιν ἐχρῆν, ἐπεὶ αἰσθητὸν ἐστὶ τὸ σημεῖον, τὸ δὲ αἰσθητὸν ἐπ' ὅλης πάντας κινεῖ, πᾶσι τὰ ἄλλα καταλαμβάνεσθαι. ἀλλ' οἱ μὲν φασιν αὐτὰ μὴ καταλαμβάνεσθαι, ὥσπερ οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς ἐμπειρίας ἰατροὶ καὶ οἱ ἀπὸ τῆς σκέψεως φιλόσοφοι, οἱ δὲ καταλαμβάνεσθαι μὲν, οὐχ ὁμοίως δέ. οὐκ ἄρα αἰσθητὸν ἐστὶ τὸ σημεῖον.⁷¹

The phrase *οἱ μὲν φασιν αὐτὰ μὴ καταλαμβάνεσθαι* in this passage has been taken out of context and misinterpreted.

⁶⁴ ... οὔτε ἄρμόζοι ἂν τῷ σκεπτικῷ τὴν αἵρεσιν ἐκείνην ἀναλαμβάνειν. μᾶλλον δὲ τὴν καλουμένην μέθοδον, ὡς ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ, δύναται ἂν μετέναι ... *P.H.* i. 236–7.

⁶⁵ *P.H.* i. 237–41.

⁶⁶ *P.H.* i. 241.

⁶⁷ *M.* viii. 327–8.

⁶⁸ *M.* viii. 191.

⁶⁹ Patrick, pp. 4–5; Brochard, p. 317; Robin, p. 197. Robin (p. 197) proposes the following solution: '... dans le dernier chapitre du I. I de ses *Hypotyposes*, il considère les Méthodiques comme représentant l'orientation sceptique mieux que ne font les Empiriques, tandis qu'ailleurs (*M.* VIII, 191) il identifie ces deux dernières orientations. La solution la plus plausible de cette difficulté est que, les *Hypotyposes* étant (c'est lui-même qui nous l'apprend, *M.* VII, 1), antérieures à ses livres *Contre les Dogmatiques*, Sextus ait incliné d'abord, en

tant que sceptique, vers le Méthodisme, et soit venue plus tard au pur Empirisme, dont ces derniers livres reflètent sans aucune ambiguïté la thèse.' Dal Pra proposes the solution: '... che Sesto, mentre scriveva la sua prima opera (gli *Schizzi pirroniani*), fosse inclinato più verso la setta metodica che verso quella empirica, mentre più tardi sarebbe venuto al puro empirismo, di cui i libri *Contro i dogmatici* rifletterebero le tesi sostanziali. Il probabile orientamento di tale evoluzione consistette forse nell'accentuazione del valore dell'esperienza e quindi, indirettamente, nell'esclusione di ogni altra via all'intuitori di essa; ma questa questione solleva il problema del dogmatismo di Sesto, che potrà essere meglio approfondito più avanti.' I maintain that there is not a contradiction which requires an explanation.

⁷⁰ Patrick, pp. 4–5.

⁷¹ *M.* viii. 191.

In *M.* viii. 186–91 Sextus is arguing against the position that there is an ‘indicative sign’ which is ‘sensible’. He assumes for the sake of argument that the sensibles have a substantial existence.⁷² He adopts the premiss that every sensible thing naturally presents itself alike to all who are in a like condition, and is similarly apprehended.⁷³ It follows from this, according to Sextus, that if the sign is sensible it will necessarily affect everyone, who is in a similar condition, in a similar way. He then observes that the Logical Doctors differ from one another as regards what the same appearances are a sign of.⁷⁴ It follows that there cannot be a sign which is sensible.

M. viii. 191 is a similar argument. It differs in that it is applied to the specific nature of the indicative sign. The indicative sign enables one to apprehend things naturally non-evident (*φύσει ἄδηλα*).⁷⁵ Since the indicative sign is sensible it ought to result in everyone apprehending non-evident things. Sextus points to the Sceptics and Empirics as examples of people whose experience has been that non-evident things are not apprehended. It is not a question of what doctrines or dogmas they maintain but merely of what appears to them to be the case. The Empiric concludes from his experience that non-evident things are inapprehensible. The Sceptic reports his experience (non-evident things are not apprehended) but regards this as merely announcing how things appear to him. He goes on inquiring because he has not apprehended the object of his investigation and suspends judgement as to whether it is apprehensible or not. The Sceptic and Empiric share in a common experience (the inability to apprehend non-evident things) but each draws a different conclusion from that experience.

Sextus prefaces this whole discussion by asking his readers to keep the practice of the Sceptics. Namely, they set out arguments against the existence of the sign, but not with conviction or assent. Their intention is to bring the inquiry to a position of equipollence.⁷⁶ Those who maintain that *M.* viii. 191 contradicts *P.H.* i. 236 and *M.* viii. 327 and 328 should also note that this passage openly contradicts what Sextus says in his preface to it.

M. viii. 191 indicates merely that the Sceptics and the Empirical Doctors share some common ground. Sextus acknowledges that by recognizing the need to distinguish the two in *P.H.* i. 236. Sextus’ statement in *M.* viii. 191 cannot be used as evidence against those who maintain that Sextus actually held the view he expressed in *P.H.* i. 326 and *M.* viii. 327 and 328. The comments which Sextus makes indicate that he did not regard the doctrines of the Empirical Sect of Medicine as being compatible with Pyrrhonism.

The external evidence supports the view that Sextus belonged to the Empirical Sect. In the *Isagoge*, a text which was falsely attributed to Galen, Sextus is included in a list of Empirical Doctors.⁷⁷ Diogenes Laertius indicates that Sextus was an Empiricist. Unfortunately Diogenes and Pseudo-Galen do not indicate what information led them to believe that Sextus was an Empirical Doctor.⁷⁸

The only conclusion which one can come to from all this is that if Sextus belonged to the Empirical Sect he did so contrary to his position as a Pyrrhonian.

⁷² *M.* viii. 187.

⁷³ *M.* viii. 187 ff.

⁷⁴ *M.* viii. 188.

⁷⁵ *M.* viii. 145–159.

⁷⁶ *M.* viii. 159–160.

⁷⁷ Galen, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Kühn,

(Leipzig, 1826), ‘*Isagoge*’ XIV. 683:

... Μηνόδοτος καὶ Σέξτος οἱ καὶ ἀκριβῶς
ἐκράτουν αὐτὴν [sc. τὴν ἐμπειρικὴν
αἴρεσιν ...].

⁷⁸ D. L. ix. 116.

His views on what medical school a Sceptic ought to belong to are quite clear. Whether or not Sextus acted contrary to his convictions is a question which does not appear to be answerable.

The tendency to attach considerable importance to the association of Pyrrhonism with the Medical Sects is not justified by the evidence. Sextus attends to it in his extant works sparingly and without any notable concern. What little information is available from other sources is not very instructive. M. Hossenfelder views Sextus' association with medicine as follows. Were Sextus trained as an Empiric he would have had no reason to change to another sect, upon adopting Pyrrhonism, since he would not believe in the principles of his medical sect as principles.⁷⁹ Sextus says that it would be more appropriate for a Pyrrhonean to belong to the Methodical Sect than the Empirical.⁸⁰ The Methodical Doctor may be characterized as an Empiric who does not believe in the principles of his sect as principles.⁸¹ Although Hossenfelder's solution, at best, is possible, it is compatible with the attitude which Sextus says a Pyrrhonean should adopt towards the principles of the Empirical Sect. Hossenfelder differs from the general tradition of interpretation in that he attempts to understand how a Pyrrhonean would regard the medical sects. Prior to Hossenfelder the assumption has been that the Pyrrhonean must adopt, as dogmas, the principles of the 'science' he practises. Sextus rejected such a view of Pyrrhonism.

5. CONCLUSION

The evidence on Sextus' life is sufficient to provide a basis for endless conjecture. The present paper has attempted to show the one undeniable fact on Sextus' life which is easily lost in the maze of possibilities. Namely, it is necessary to suspend judgement on Sextus' life in almost every detail.

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⁷⁹ M. Hossenfelder, *Sextus Empiricus: Grundriss der Pyrrhonischen Skepsis*, (Frankfurt am Main, 1968), pp. 84 ff.

⁸⁰ *P.H.* i. 236 ff.

⁸¹ *P.H.* i. 236 ff.