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Inquiry Journal

Spring 2006

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Recommended Citation

Eichorn, Roger, "Philosophy and Common Life: Pyrrhonism and the Anthropological Crisis of Modernity" (2006). *Inquiry Journal*. 8.

https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry_2006/8

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research ARTICLE

Philosophy and Common Life: Pyrrhonism and the Anthropological Crisis of Modernity

—Roger Eichorn

“This world, where much is to be done, and little known...”

—Samuel Johnson

Is it possible to find genuine meaning in one’s culture when faced with overwhelming evidence that all cultural conventions are arbitrary and relative? I call this the anthropological crisis of modernity.

The crisis can be traced back to the sixteenth-century intellectual revolutions that gave rise to the modern world. In a sense, the liberal intellectual tradition of the past four centuries has been playing out the consequences of Michel de Montaigne’s essays, which argue that law, custom, and beliefs are culturally relative. A great deal of that tradition consists of attempts to defeat Montaigne’s skeptical relativism, as though it were the enemy. It is my contention, however, that skepticism, that is, doubt concerning ultimate truth and ultimate reality, is above all constructive. It is not the enemy. In fact, skepticism is the only stable intellectual position. For no matter how thoroughly a new dogmatism thinks it has defeated the “enemy,” the skeptical dragon inevitably rises again. Given the instability of dogmatism, it is skepticism itself that provides the only stable solution to the anthropological crisis that it is frequently charged with having created.

Skepticism's Children

Though often relegated to a footnote in the history of thought, skepticism stands front and center in all periods of profound cultural and philosophical development. In the ancient world, Plato’s philosophy was a reaction against the nihilistic skepticism of the Sophists (1). The late Richard Popkin spent his distinguished career uncovering the role skepticism played in the emergence of the modern world. His research shows how skepticism underwrote the Protestant Reformation and laid the groundwork for the break with Aristotelian Scholasticism and the rise of the “new science” in the seventeenth century. “Voltaire later said that [Pierre] Bayle [the ‘supersceptic’] provided the arsenal of the Enlightenment” (2). At the dawn of modernity, René Descartes set out to defeat Montaigne’s skepticism in his *Meditations*. Descartes’s philosophy was hugely influential in shaping the modern mind, but most contemporary philosophers would agree with Popkin’s characterization of Descartes’s solution to the skeptical crisis as a “heroic failure” (2). A few centuries later, inspired by the skepticism of David Hume, Immanuel Kant attempted to permanently overthrow the doubts of

the skeptics in his monumental *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant's *Critique* changed the face of Western philosophy forever, but it too failed to answer the skeptical challenge.

Without first having been awoken from his "dogmatic slumber" by the work of David Hume, Kant never would have written his *Critique*. Without the skepticism of Montaigne, Descartes never would have written his *Meditations*. Without the nihilistic relativism of the Sophists, Socrates never would have undertaken to educate the people of Athens and Plato never would have developed the elaborate metaphysical system that is seen as the headwaters of the Western philosophical tradition. So much is philosophy indebted for its proudest monuments to the persistent challenge of skepticism!

Despite the influence and sheer analytic virtuosity of philosophers such as Plato, Descartes, and Kant, no one has successfully refuted skepticism. A dogmatic philosophy might withstand the skeptical barrage for a decade or a century (or, in Aristotle's case, a millennium), but eventually it is either dismantled from within or sacked from without. Given skepticism's resilience, a common strategy of philosophers has been, whether innocently or maliciously, to misrepresent the skeptical position in order to render it unacceptable. Modern philosophical skepticism is understood as presenting philosophy with a set of epistemological puzzles—i.e., puzzles concerning the nature of knowledge—that philosophers must solve if they are to claim to know anything at all. The assumption seems to be that if we cannot secure the foundations of knowledge, we must believe nothing. As Plato has Socrates claim repeatedly throughout the Platonic Dialogues, "we must remain persuaded [by what an argument has demonstrated] until someone shows us a better [argument]" (3). Or, more evocatively, "The lover of inquiry must follow his beloved wherever it may lead" (4). It follows from Socrates's dictum that if skepticism demonstrates that our beliefs are unjustified, we must abandon our beliefs. Many philosophers argue, however, that since we *do*, by an uncontrollable necessity, believe in all sorts of things, inquiry cannot proceed down the skeptical path. Skepticism simply must be wrong.

As Friedrich Nietzsche pointed out, this conclusion displays nothing so much as a lack of intellectual integrity. More importantly for our purposes, it assumes that skepticism necessitates disbelief in such things as morality, other minds, and the external world. I will show in the following section that, properly understood—that is, understood in the Pyrrhonian sense—skepticism does nothing of the sort. In fact, it never necessitates disbelief (as a negative judgment). Rather, it merely calls for *suspension of judgment*, and then only on "unclear matters."

Pyrrhonism

Two schools of philosophical skepticism arose in ancient Greece. The first, Academic skepticism, held that no knowledge is possible. The best humans can do is determine the probability of a given proposition being true. The second, Pyrrhonian skepticism (named after the semi-legendary Pyrrho of Elis, a contemporary of Aristotle) accused the Academicians of negative dogmatism in claiming that no knowledge is possible, for surely, if the Academicians *know* that no knowledge is possible, then knowledge is possible. Furthermore, if one can determine the probability of a given proposition being true, one must possess a degree of knowledge concerning the status of the proposition relative to competing propositions. In contrast to the Academicians, Pyrrhonians proposed to suspend judgment on all unclear matters, including whether knowledge is possible or whether one proposition is more plausible than another.

Since Pyrrhonism's emergence in the ancient world, critics have argued that it would render life unlivable. The seventeenth-century skeptic David Hume argued that external-world skepticism was psychologically impossible to maintain. "Nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity, has determin'd us to judge [of the truth of propositions] as well as to breathe and feel" (5). The logical or epistemological puzzles of the skeptic "*admit of no answer and produce no conviction*," their only result being a "momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion" that nature swiftly brushes aside (6). The philosopher (including the Academic skeptic) may say whatever he likes from his closet—for example, that we have no knowledge of an external world or the existence of other minds—but common life will not spare a moment to register such revelations. As Nietzsche wrote, "Nothing is easier to erase than a dialectical effect: the effect of every meeting at which there are speeches proves this" (7). Life blithely brushes aside such philosophical effects, as though they were of no consequence—which, in everyday life, they are not.

For thousands of years, this argument has been presented as a refutation of skepticism. But the fact is that it fails to contradict Pyrrhonism. Pyrrhonians only suspend judgment on "unclear matters." As Sextus Empiricus, the main source of our knowledge of Pyrrhonism, wrote:

When we say that Sceptics do not hold beliefs, we do not take 'belief' in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that belief is acquiescing in something; for Sceptics assent to the feelings forced upon them by appearances... They do not hold belief in the sense in which some say that belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences; for Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything unclear...

Thus, attending to what is apparent, we live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions—for we are not able to be utterly inactive...

We coherently follow, to all appearances, an account which shows us a life in conformity with traditional customs and the law and persuasions and our own feelings. (8)

In other words, Pyrrhonians are almost identical to the non-philosophical people who fill the ranks of common life. The crucial difference between the two is that Pyrrhonism purges common life of prejudiced philosophies. Thus, Pyrrhonians will not dogmatically assert the superiority of their customs over those of other cultures, whereas dogmatists—both of the philosophical and non-philosophical variety—believe that their favored dogmas illuminate absolute values which they can bring to bear in order to judge, praise, and condemn.

Philosophy and Common Life

In *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, Donald Livingston characterizes Hume as a "post-Pyrrhonian." According to Livingston, the principle difference between a Pyrrhonian and a post-Pyrrhonian lies in their relationships to philosophy (9). The Pyrrhonian is seen as rejecting philosophy in favor of "common life," that is, a life lived in accordance with the laws, customs, and personal inclinations of the Pyrrhonian and his society. It is a conservative position that casts a wary eye on all innovations. The post-Pyrrhonian, on the other hand, seeks to reconcile philosophy and common life; he recognizes the latter to be the stable foundation that philosophy left on its own has been unable to provide for itself. For Hume, to reconcile philosophy and common life is to pass from "false" to "true" philosophy. False philosophy is not only ridiculous, ending in the complete absurdity that

we know nothing, but is also dangerous, in that it supports an array of metaphysico-religious prejudices (e.g., a belief in the inherent superiority of one ethnic group over another on the grounds that one is God's chosen people and the other are heathens). Hume saw true philosophy as a "calm, though obscure, region" in which a person can shelter himself from the "fury and contention" of competing superstitions (10). The true philosopher will limit, based on his Pyrrhonism, the scope of his inquiries to an examination and ordering of the conventions of common life. The post-Pyrrhonian recognizes that "there is no Archimedean point outside common life as a whole from which it can be either certified or criticized" (9). Critique will remain internal.

The conservative response to the anthropological crisis of modernity is to restate the propositions under debate—that is, to simply deny, on the authority of the traditions in question, that there is anything to debate. Patriotism and love of one's country, they argue, are incompatible with skeptical doubts about the moral status of one's culture. This view ignores the role skepticism plays in times of cultural flux, such as Greece after the Periclean Golden Age or Western Europe in the Renaissance. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries are just such a period of transition, a process that is underway no matter what anyone has to say about it. Historically speaking, then, such doubts are to be expected. Culturally and philosophically speaking, they are not the destructive forces they are made out to be; they are *constructive*.

The question is: What will skepticism construct next (or, if you prefer, what will it cause to be constructed)? In the periods we have considered, skepticism gave rise to dogmas that, while failing to answer the skeptical challenge, managed to fend it off for a time by convincing people that an answer to the crisis had been found or would be found if the path laid out by the dogmas was followed. Descartes and Kant offered just such dogmatic systems. Given time, however, even the most elaborate dogmas collapse in on themselves. Therefore, if the future proves to be like the past, any dogmatic solution to the skeptical crisis will be temporary. If temporary solutions are unacceptable, then dogmatic solutions are unacceptable. That leaves us with an interesting question: What if we don't *need* a dogmatic solution? What if the "skeptical crisis" isn't really a crisis at all? What if philosophy suffers not from a skeptical crisis, but from a dogmatic crisis?

Skepticism—the Solution

It is my contention that post-Pyrrhonism offers the only stable framework for supporting cultural identity in the face of overwhelming evidence of cross-cultural relativity and arbitrariness. As I suggested in the previous paragraph, skepticism is only a "crisis" if dogma is thought to be necessary to support, for example, social stability or intellectual advancement. In the same way, anthropological evidence of cultural relativity is only a "crisis" if the existence of absolute values is thought to be necessary to secure or maintain cultural identity. Post-Pyrrhonism shows us a way out of the anthropological crisis by denying that the information anthropology collects is cause for a crisis. Post-Pyrrhonism does not "defeat" the crisis, in the sense that skepticism was thought to have been defeated countless times in the past; rather, it accepts the apparent anthropological facts while denying those facts their supposedly destructive entailments.

"The world," Montaigne wrote, "is nothing but variety and dissimilarity" (11). When we examine the world as anthropologists, "our reason does not find a stay and a foundation" (12). To those seeking absolute, unchanging foundations for cultural practices, this may seem like a cause for crisis. But the authority of a culture, according to Montaigne, lies not in absolute values, but in custom: "[W]hat all philosophy cannot implant in the head of the wisest men, does not custom by her sole ordinance teach the crudest common herd?"

(12). We rarely recognize the arbitrariness of our own customs, often mistaking them for absolutes, because “the principal effect of the power of custom is to seize and ensnare us in such a way that it is hardly within our power to get ourselves back out of its grip and return into ourselves to reflect and reason about its ordinances” (12). Viewed externally, as an empirical phenomenon, a particular culture seems no more or less justifiable than another, but the post-Pyrrhonian will recognize and respect the *internal* authority of common life.

In a crucial passage, Montaigne wrote:

Whoever wants to get rid of this violent prejudice of custom will find many things accepted with undoubting resolution, which have no support but in the hoary beard and the wrinkles of usage that goes with them; but when this mask is torn off, and he refers to things in truth and reason, he will feel his judgment as it were all upset, and nevertheless restored to a much surer status. (12)

This passage may seem cryptic, but we should be in a position to make some sense of it. The only foundation for custom is “the hoary beard and the wrinkles of usage.” When the venerable mask of usage is torn off, we suffer the anthropological crisis—our judgment is “as it were all upset” by the unsettling outcome of referring things to “truth and reason.” Montaigne does not abandon us in this state, however. Once we recognize that custom is not grounded in absolutes, our judgment is “nevertheless restored to a much surer status.” We accept cultural relativity, the absence of absolute values, but we also come to recognize the ultimate authority of common life. Custom provides a surer foundation for cultural practices than mythic absolutes, because absolutes inevitably crumble under the skeptical barrage, whereas customs change but never lose their authority.

Skepticism solves the anthropological crisis by locating the foundation of cultural practices in the ultimate authority of custom, not in any external standard or empirical regularity. “I should hate as much to see a German putting water in his wine as a Frenchman drinking it pure,” Montaigne wrote. “Public usage lays down the law in such things” (13). And of such things are cultures built. The price of this skeptical solution is a certain diffidence toward alien cultures: in a word, toleration. “[W]hat is off the hinges of custom,” Montaigne wrote, “people believe to be off the hinges of reason: God knows how unreasonably, most of the time” (12). The authority of custom provides a stable foundation for cultural identity, but—when purged of dogmatic philosophies—it provides no foundation for prejudice.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, holding tight to absolute values is a cause for crisis. Skepticism is the solution.

I would like to thank Professor David Hiley and the entire philosophy department for introducing me to the riches of our intellectual heritage.

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Author Bio

Roger Eichorn seems to have been a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellow in 2005, for which he may have begun work on a senior honors thesis in philosophy, reportedly entitled *The Limits of Philosophy, or the Philosophy of Limits: The Pyrrhonian Impulse from Heraclitus to Postmodernism*. Roger appears to be a Philosophy/History double major, and he very well might graduate in May 2006. He is a skeptic.

Mentor Bio

David Hiley came to the University of New Hampshire six years ago to be Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs. Since then, Professor Hiley has moved from administrative work to teaching in the Philosophy Department, for which he is also the acting Chairman. Professor Hiley's specialty is Political Philosophy. In working with student researcher Roger Eichorn, Professor Hiley was most surprised by the "expansive and sophisticated understanding of philosophy" that Roger possessed. This was much more than Professor Hiley "had expected of an undergraduate." Professor Hiley hopes that other professors acting as mentors to student researchers can "benefit from the eagerness of a talented, highly motivated student," as he has. Professor Hiley notes the rewards of working with undergraduate researchers: "I have probably gained as much as Roger has [from this process]."