

## Scepticism as a route to happiness

The Cranky Professor

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Pyrrho, a philosopher of the early Hellenistic period of ancient Greek civilization, was esteemed by his contemporaries as the happiest and most even tempered of men. In times of ease and in times of hardship Pyrrho was equally joyful and contented.

As a philosopher, Pyrrho was a sceptic, and Pyrrho maintained that his character and contentment were entirely products of his scepticism. In philosophy, scepticism is the thesis that no one knows anything about anything. (While sceptics believe that no one knows anything about anything, they don't, of course, profess to know that no one knows anything about anything. As far as we know, they say, no one knows anything about anything—as far as we know.)

No one knows anything, Pyrrho said, for if one were to know something, one would have a knock-down argument in favour of that something, and no one has a knock-down argument in favour of anything. (Not even this argument is knock down.) No one has a knock-down argument in favour of anything, he added, for each of any two opposing theses can be maintained with some degree of evidence and rigour in argument. Let's try it to see. "Peace is better than war" is one thesis, "war is better than peace is another." You, of course, think that peace is better than war, but you have to admit that war has its attractions and virtues. On these attractions and virtues a strong case that war is better than peace can be made. "I'm right now reading about an ancient Greek sceptic" is a thesis, "I'm right now not reading about an ancient Greek sceptic" is another. On the one hand, you have the evidence of your senses, but how trustworthy is that? On the other hand, you have the sheer implausibility of the thesis. Good arguments are available on both sides.

When fairly good arguments can be had on both sides of a question, the proper response is to suspend judgement. That isn't the same as suspending belief, which in countless cases would be impossible to do. You cannot help but believe that you are reading something right now. But you can sincerely deny that you know you are reading something right now. So go ahead and believe what you will on the strength of the evidence you have, says Pyrrho. But don't think that the evidence you have amounts to your knowing something. It doesn't. From another point of view, against the backdrop of another set of beliefs, the opposite of what you believe can be defended as well, and neither you nor anyone else is well enough positioned to judge either point of view definitively superior to the other.

Scepticism about knowledge frees one from the worry that one is wrong, Pyrrho taught, and worry is the source of discontent and unhappiness. To be happy, then, Pyrrho advised, imperturbably happy, just admit to oneself that one knows nothing about anything.

Epicurus, a young philosopher when Pyrrho was old, thought this was crazy. Epicurus knew of Pyrrho, perhaps through his teacher, Nausiphanes, who might have been an associate of Pyrrho; perhaps Epicurus even knew Pyrrho personally. Epicurus admired Pyrrho greatly, though only for his imperturbable happiness, not for his scepticism. Epicurus agreed with Pyrrho that the happy life was the life of contentment and that worry was the great spoiler of contentment. But one who didn't know anything, Epicurus reasoned, would be constantly worried and, as a consequence, miserably unhappy.

Epicurus was a dogmatist. In philosophy, dogmatism is the thesis that there are some things we do know, things of which we know that we know them, things of which we know that we know that we know them, and so on.

Suppose one doesn't know what pleases the gods or what angers them. One will constantly be worried that one is outside their good graces. We can know, though, according to Epicurus, after just a little thought, that the gods are absolutely indifferent to us (after all, the gods are wise enough not to let their happiness be held hostage to the ways or fortunes of bumbling like us). Only knowledge that we can neither curry their favour nor draw their wrath will free us from our worry that we might be acting impiously. Happily, that knowledge is ours.

Scepticism or dogmatism? Which is the route to contentment and lasting happiness? Not sure? Pyrrho would say good for you. You're well on your way.