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“Did Descartes Read Sextus’s *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*?” A “Sceptical” Response


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This article has been invited by *The European Legacy* editors as a response to Ayumu Tamura’s “Did Descartes Read Sextus’s *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*?” which continues the promising lines of enquiry he has opened up into the possible influence of ancient authors and concepts on Descartes’s philosophy. It is intended that Tamura’s article and this response will together help further debate on Descartes and what we can hope to establish of his sources, while serving also as a specific example of the general problems associated with presenting or proving indirect influences of ancient philosophy on major figures of modern thought, particularly on innovators such as Descartes—where might we trace and how might we demonstrate direct lines of influence, identify continuities on the one hand and discontinuities or disruptions of lines of thought on the other, and establish whether such represent in each case a conscious continuity or opposition to major predecessors. I have called the response “sceptical” in so far as I am not satisfied the case for direct knowledge of Sextus in Descartes has been established; but, conceding as one must that the opposite is equally not conclusively demonstrable, I have been happy to accept the editors’ invitation and for this friendly exchange to be presented to readers.

Tamura’s article makes the case that Descartes was familiar with ancient sceptical philosophy as transmitted by Sextus Empiricus, and specifically with Sextus’s *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, and that Descartes’s direct familiarity with this source is a matter of “historico-philosophical significance”—because, if we accept Descartes’s having taken over ideas and terminology of ancient scepticism, we can perhaps better understand his own conception of what he is doing and against what exactly his project is directed. The case chiefly rests on a comparison of select passages from different works of Descartes with passages from Sextus’s *Outlines*, under four headings, contending that similarities of principles and phrasing encourage the conclusion that Descartes knew Sextus directly.

Direct inspiration from Sextus in Descartes’s work indeed would permit us to conjecture something about his philosophical project, and so demonstration of such would be valuable. I suggest however that more and firmer evidence than is presented would be required to persuade on this point. To establish adequately the case of Descartes’s familiarity with Sextus’s *Outlines* and the philosophical importance of the fact, four things would be required of an argument:

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- (1) It should persuade that, on the balance of probability, Descartes not only read *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* but engaged with its arguments, even if not explicitly. Tamura is frank in the admission that evidence must be indirect here (and ultimately only tentatively answers the question in the article's title in the affirmative); there is nothing in Descartes's surviving writings to establish definitively that he knew the text. One should hope then at least for a large quantity of indirect evidence, which is not provided and is probably not available in known writings of Descartes.
- (2) A complicating factor in this question is that Descartes almost certainly was equipped with a fair understanding of the chief arguments in Sextus's primary works, and a reasonably accurate understanding of ancient scepticism, which would not have required any direct acquaintance with Sextus's texts. To accept his familiarity with those texts, therefore, one must be persuaded that, on the balance of the evidence, references to Sextus or echoes of his arguments come from Descartes's having read Sextus, and not from other sources, ancient or modern (including summaries or compendia). Tamura acknowledges some of the other potential sources of such knowledge, or of similarities of phrasing or in the framing of a problem; and there is not sufficient evidence that these (and others not mentioned) were not indeed the sources of Descartes's familiarity (such as it was) with ancient scepticism.
- (3) As well as establishing from parts of Descartes's work that he could have read *Outlines*, some consideration must be given to the question of how practically likely it is that he *would* have: what definite evidence have we for editions or translations of Sextus circulating in the various cities or intellectual circles in which Descartes moved? Was the text well known or obscure; and if its contents or arguments were well known, were copies of it in the original accessible or rare? There is no reliable evidence to support any speculation on this point.
- (4) It should establish why familiarity with *Outlines* is really important in assessing Descartes's philosophical project, or his outlook at a particular stage in the development of his philosophy. What did he likely adopt, adapt, repudiate, or modify in Sextus that contributes to our deeper understanding of Descartes's aims or methods? To show substantial reflection on, or response to, theses in Sextus's *Outlines* in Descartes would encourage one in the conclusion that he knew the text directly, but this kind of reflection is not adequately established.

The arguments presented by Tamura may be addressed under these four headings.

1.

As Tamura acknowledges, Descartes says little in his published work about ancient scepticism, and nothing directly about Sextus. This of course does not mean he did not know Sextus's work, and we cannot infer ignorance from silence. We might indeed rather infer caution, for the name of Sextus was associated, and at certain times and places virtually synonymous, with atheism. But such circumspection we would not expect to extend to a man's private correspondence. We know that Descartes could be much less

reserved about the implications, aims and inspirations of his work in private: he famously writes to his friend and patron Marin Mersenne of the character of the *Meditations*:

And I will tell you, between us, that these six *Meditations* contain all the foundations of my physics. But do not say so, please; for those who are partisans of Aristotle would perhaps find it difficult to approve of them; and my hope is that those who read them will gradually accustom themselves to my principles, and recognise the truth in them before they perceive that they destroy those of Aristotle.¹

We have a large volume of surviving correspondence from Descartes, to various correspondents, but nothing in it touching directly on Pyrrhonism. Descartes discussed Epicurus with Elizabeth of Bohemia,² Epicurus and Democritus with Plempius,³ Aristotle with Mersenne, et cetera, but nowhere evokes Sextus. In a letter to Vatier, Descartes admits the unsatisfactory nature of the treatment of the proof of the existence of God in the *Discourse on Method*, but excuses himself with the defence that “the principal cause of its obscurity arises from the fact that I did not dare to dwell on the arguments of the sceptics” (je n’ay osé m’étendre sur les raisons des sceptiques).⁴ His point is that the *Discourse* was intended for a relatively general readership, without philosophical learning, who might have been bamboozled or seduced by the “arguments of the sceptics” too much to perceive the way through them to the truth of God’s existence. The “arguments of the sceptics” sounds more like familiarity with general accounts of ancient scepticism (perhaps from a secondary source) than with Sextus.

Tamura notes that in the Reply to the Second Objection to the *Meditations*—mainly directed to Mersenne—Descartes remarks that “I had seen many old writings by the academics and sceptics [on doubting everything as preparatory to obtaining secure knowledge].”⁵ This however, like the numerous (mostly hostile) references to “the sceptics” in the Fifth Reply to Gassendi, gives us no concrete indication Descartes had read Sextus. Though Gail Fine notes reasonably of the remark in the Second Objection that “though [Descartes] unfortunately does not name the works, it is difficult to believe that Sextus’s were not among them: it is not as though a lot of other books by Pyrrhonists were available,”⁶ this leaves us with little beyond speculation. We have very little definite evidence for what Descartes read at all, never mind what he read *well*—even if it were likely the text of *Outlines* had once passed through his hands, we could not conclude from his own words that it made any impression. The coupling of “academics and sceptics” is loose enough to encompass non-Pyrrhonist authors; and given the commonplace, explicit invocation of Pyrrhonism by contemporary enthusiasts or those concerned to repudiate the theses, we might well expect Descartes to have specified Sextus or the Pyrrhonists in this connection, if that is what was chiefly meant.

Turning to the selected comparisons of Descartes with Sextus:

The Syllogistic

Tamura admits that this comparison offers negligible evidence for Descartes’s awareness of Sextus; it is indeed in Tamura’s words “quite weak.” The quoted passage from Francisco Sanches, preceding Descartes by some decades, is much closer in spirit and phrasing to the first Sextus passage than are the passages from Descartes; given this, one would be inclined to the conclusion that Descartes’s objections to the syllogism are not much indebted to Sextus.

One commentator notes of Descartes's critique in relation to Sextus that the two have quite different, indeed irreconcilable motives in critiquing the syllogism, which would make them uneasy bedfellows: "There is some similarity between the two critiques, insofar as both Sextus and Descartes suggest that there are valid arguments that escape the syllogistic and invalid arguments ruled valid by it. But a major difference is that Descartes does believe there to be valid syllogisms. He becomes irritable when Bourdin accuses him of rejecting the syllogism, answering that he has 'always been prepared to use syllogisms when the occasion required it' (AT VII, 522). . . . If Descartes had regarded syllogisms as inherently either useless or invalid, as Sextus seems to do, he would not have used them."⁷ The comparison here does not encourage imputation of familiarity. (If the shadow of Sextus did loom here, inspiration could incidentally equally have come from the *Adversus Mathematicos*, complicating the argument for influence of the *Outlines*.)⁸

Rules for everyday conduct in the face of sceptical doubts

The primary rule of conduct that is claimed common to Sextus and Descartes, outwardly to obey the customs of one's country, could, as Tamura notes, have been borrowed by Descartes from either Montaigne or Pierre Charron. It of course could equally have come to them and to Descartes from a stock of common wisdom, or from a different common source (indeed, the principle is perfectly Socratic; and Montaigne, Charron, and Descartes might have taken it over from the counsels of Christ). It is in the actual formulation of a set of rules of everyday conduct, in the face of scepticism, that Tamura sees the likely indebtedness of Descartes to Sextus.

The issue here is that Sextus's passage does not refer to formulated rules of conduct, the kind of self-legislation that Descartes aims at. Sextus rather is simply observing that we are not rendered immobile by sceptical reservation of judgement, but are impelled toward certain acts and attitudes by four distinguishable forces: "guidance by nature, necessitation by feelings, handing down of laws and customs, and teaching of kinds of expertise." We do not choose these guides to action in the manner in which Descartes resolves to obey provisional rules of conduct in the face of sceptical withholding of assent; Sextus's passage is an enumeration of the unchosen forces from which our customary attitudes arise. The fact that both Descartes and Sextus outline four rules is admitted probably coincidental; indeed, it has been argued elsewhere that Descartes's four "provisional" rules in fact represent a final moral ethic, and that they aim to displace the four traditional cardinal virtues of justice, courage, moderation and wisdom.⁹

Definition

The doubt cast by both Descartes and Sextus on the usefulness of the search for definition, and their common focus on the difficulties ensuing from seeking common definitions of 'man' like 'rational animal,' are the chief points of comparison. But again, the motivations and import are more different than the phrasing is similar. Descartes is making the point—derived from and necessary to his *Cogito*—that doubt, thought, and existence are immediately self-evident, and in that way resistant to definition, while Sextus is claiming that the search for definitions is subject to the common Pyrrhonian solvent of claims to knowledge, the *diallelus* (or 'dilemma of the criterion').

As to the definition of 'man', reference to the 'rational animal' strikes one as simply quick recourse to the most influential definition of man proposed in the history of

philosophy. Descartes uses the definition to highlight the difficulty that one must define one thing in terms of another, leading potentially to an infinite sequence (he in fact is closer to the substance of Sextus's *diallelus* with this point). Sextus meanwhile is indulging in a more mocking exercise with a very ancient pedigree (the anecdote in Montaigne, which Tamura mentions, about a critic plucking a live capon and calling it "Plato's man," comes from Diogenes Laertius's *Life of Diogenes of Sinope*, and may well be apocryphal—if it was real, it would have arisen from taking seriously what is clearly a set of less-than-serious proposals in Plato's *Sophist*). Again, the comparison does not concretely support assertion of direct familiarity with Sextus.

The rarity of truth and majority decision

The comparison here, including reference to the rarity of truth, on which is based the claim that Descartes more likely was influenced by Sextus than by Montaigne in his formulation, I would contend is not as exact as Tamura argues. Sextus directly claims the rarity of truth means that one man could well hit upon it where it is missed by the many. Descartes's point is that one man is much more likely than is a multitude to hit upon the truth—that is, that a multitude is inherently unphilosophical.

Apart from its being implicitly endorsed by Descartes's rules for the exercise of reason and discernment of truth, disregard of majority decision could very well have come from other ancient authorities; Tamura acknowledges the idea's presence in Plato (see specifically *Laches* 184e or *Crito* 48a; and see *Crito* 44d, *Gorgias* 464a–b, 482c, *Statesman* 300e, *Republic* 494a). It is difficult then to hold that this generic claim about the unwisdom of multitudes, which is the import of Descartes's passage, is indebted to Sextus.

2.

Tamura rightly invokes Montaigne, Sanches, and Charron as popularisers of Sextus and sceptical ideas, and as possible sources for some of Descartes's knowledge of them. There are figures closer to Descartes who must also be considered in the same line. Mersenne in 1625 in Paris published an enormous volume titled *La Vérité des sciences contre les sceptiques ou Pyrrhoniens*. Mersenne's concern was less the outright refutation of scepticism (to which one might say he conceded some ground) than the defence of the demonstrable truths of the sciences against any claim that truth was unknowable. The foregrounding of Pyrrhonism in Mersenne's attack points to another potential avenue through which Descartes's attention could have been drawn to it and to ancient scepticism, and we can confidently assume his familiarity with the text of an intimate like Mersenne, the influence of which was significant.¹⁰ Mersenne's however was only one of a raft of contemporary attacks on revived scepticism, mainly issuing from counterreformers.¹¹ A tribute in Latin verse to Descartes titled "Philosophiae Restauratori, Seculi ornamento" (To the Restorer of Philosophy, the Ornament of the Century), writes of the outcome of the *Meditations*: "Surely the atheist falls by his own arms: and unbelieving Sextus is overcome by his own art" (*Certe Atheus propriis cadit armis: & malè Sextus/Assensum cohibens, vincitur arte sua*) (AT VIII, 340). The coupling here of atheism and Pyrrhonism echoes the link in Mersenne's works between atheism, deism, and Pyrrhonism.

Another important antagonist of revived scepticism was Jean Silhon, one passage of whose work remarkably anticipated Descartes's *Cogito* and ontological proof, and who explicitly directed the certitude that doubting or thinking implied existing against Pyrrhonism.¹² Like Mersenne, Silhon was known to Descartes, and was perhaps a correspondent (the letter at AT I, 353–54, March 1637 to an unknown addressee is conjectured to be to Silhon; Descartes mentions him in letters to other correspondents). Among his chief concerns is to refute Pyrrhonism as preparatory to establishment of sure knowledge.¹³ In all of this, then, we cannot be certain that Descartes's knowledge of Pyrrhonism derived from actual knowledge of Sextus—rather, the accumulation of other possible sources of that knowledge perhaps shifts the balance of evidence the other way. (An analogy: in Berkeley's *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Philonous marshals a variety of Pyrrhonist arguments throughout the first dialogue to confute Hylas, without himself ever succumbing to sceptical reservation of judgement—enough to suggest a knowledge of the *Outlines* on Berkeley's part. The dialogue was like Mersenne's earlier work explicitly directed by its subtitle “against atheists and sceptics.” But we happen to know in this case that Berkeley's knowledge of Pyrrhonism came largely from the entry on Pyrrho in Bayle's *Dictionary*.)

3.

Pyrrhonism recovered via Sextus would of course in Christian Europe have been recognised as potentially incendiary. (One might compare it to the early 15C. recovery of Lucretius by Poggio and its subsequent dissemination and influence.) Sextus, as Tamura notes, “was translated into Latin in the sixteenth century and was widely circulated, which led to the revival of ancient Scepticism in early modern times and to its influence on many philosophers.” This was the translation of Henri Estienne published in Geneva in 1562. Just a few years after Estienne's translation of the *Outlines*, Gentian Hervet rendered all of Sextus in Latin (1569); Hervet's scholarly reputation—his 1534 English translation of Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* gained currency as a handbook of household and estate management—might indeed have encouraged further dissemination of Sextus's texts and ideas. It is true the sceptical theses in Sextus enjoyed considerable renown, but as with the popularisation of Epicurean-Lucretian ideas, where far more became acquainted with them than actually read *De rerum natura*, the ideas of Pyrrho-Sextus gained currency far beyond those familiar with the texts. One scholar concludes an investigation into the early modern diffusion of ancient sceptical ideas by asserting “the ancient sceptical texts were somewhat better known during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries (before the printing of Sextus Empiricus) than is generally realized.”¹⁴ Prior translations existed in manuscript form but remained in private libraries (the earliest known Latin translation of *Outlines*, preserved in three manuscripts, is dated to the end of the 13C).¹⁵ A translation by the Spanish humanist Paéz de Castro “probably remained unknown and unread in the past, but it may be an indication of the fact that some interest in Sextus Empiricus was rising at least by the mid-sixteenth century.”¹⁶ There is no definite record of any manuscript or edition of Sextus having come into Descartes's hands, and his engagement with the sceptics remains general enough to suggest that he may have acquired knowledge of them via secondary sources. Baillet's biography has no indication the sceptics were included in either formative or later formal studies Descartes pursued. Descartes's name

certainly did not become associated with modern French scepticism; it would seem he was not even suspected of being a secret Pyrrhonist. It is not a decisive point on this score but is worth noting that, when a first French translation of Sextus's works was published in 1725 by the Swiss mathematician Claude Huart, as *Les Hipotiposes ou Institutions Pirroniennes de Sextus Empiricus en trois livres, Traduites du grec* (reissued in 1735), the author in his preface to the work "mentioned that so many great men both ancient and modern have been skeptics, and in the last century there have been so many '*habiles*' skeptics such as Pierre Charron, Michel de Montaigne, La Mothe Le Vayer, the savant Gassendi, secretly Bayle, and 'tout nouvellement feu M. Huet,' former bishop of Avranches."¹⁷ Descartes, surely already greater in reputation than any of those listed, would have been numbered here if his debt to the sceptics were in any way suspected. In any event, the nature of the circulation of ideas among learned men in Descartes's era makes it at least as likely that he came to a good command of sceptical ideas without direct knowledge of Sextus as with it; absent at the very least evidence that close associates of Descartes acquired Estienne's or Huet's editions or some other manuscript at a time Descartes could have borrowed the book, the mere popularity of Pyrrhonist ideas cannot encourage the conclusion that Descartes had direct access to them.

4.

This is connected to the final point. "It is possible that Descartes never read Sextus' work," Luciano Floridi writes, "but this is less crucial than it may seem because, by the time the *Meditations* were published, we should no longer speak of the influence of Sextus Empiricus' skeptical arguments on modern philosophy, but rather take them to be an integral part of it."¹⁸ It could very reasonably be argued that, given the absence of direct engagement with the ancient sceptical tradition by Descartes, it does not actually matter whether he in fact read Sextus or came to some familiarity with his arguments by secondary channels. This weakens somewhat Tamura's initial claim that Descartes's having read the *Outlines* would be a matter of "historico-philosophical significance." Descartes is certainly not a Pyrrhonist—Cartesian radical doubt is introduced in order to be refuted and overcome, not, as in Montaigne's or Charron's approving use of Sextus, and those of others such as François Veron, in order to repudiate Protestantism and urge a form of fideism.¹⁹ Descartes's references to ancient scepticism are either neutral or hostile, never approving; and I feel the present state of evidence will not vindicate the claim that demonstrating a direct familiarity with the texts of Sextus, rather than a general one with his ideas, would significantly alter our assessment of Descartes's philosophical project.

In sum, one cannot, I think, substantiate the central claim of familiarity on the evidence offered, and so one cannot add significantly to what is known about Descartes's relationship to ancient scepticism. Similarities in terminology are inconclusive, however much they are occasionally tantalising. Tamura's contention, made the subject of a previous article, that Descartes's use of *pronuntiatum* to describe the necessarily true statement "I am, I exist" is significant, the term being a Ciceronian rendering of *axiōma*, deserves attention, given how rare *pronuntiatum* is in Descartes;²⁰ but again, *Tusculan Disputations*, where Cicero introduces the term in the absence of a better one while admitting it unsatisfactory, is a plausible conduit, and we cannot necessarily deduce from its use

Descartes's debt either to Stoicism or to Sextus as a source on Stoic logic.²¹ This "sceptical" conclusion is not of course intended to foreclose the possibility of Tamura's case ever being persuasive; though we might not expect new and unknown writings of Descartes's to emerge that might settle the matter, the accumulation of further indirect evidence for it in the known writings remains a possibility. In the absence of such at the present time, however, or of substantial support for the theses in correspondents or early interpreters of Descartes, one must on this subject remain finally and perhaps prudently agnostic.

Notes

1. Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, III, 297–98 (28 January 1641). All citations are to the Adam and Tannery edition of Descartes's *Oeuvres* (hereafter AT), using the standard referencing by volume and page number.
2. Descartes, AT IV, 269, 272 (16/18 August 1645).
3. Descartes, AT I, 413 (3 October 1637).
4. Descartes, AT I, 560 (22 February 1638).
5. Descartes, AT VII, 130; IX, 103.
6. Fine, "Descartes and Ancient Skepticism," 200.
7. Douglas, "Descartes's Critique of the Syllogistic," 335.
8. See Sextus, *Against the Logicians* II.223, 353.
9. Cimakasky and Polansky, "Descartes' 'Provisional Morality.'"
10. Clarke, *Descartes: A Biography*, 73–74, 189; cf. Baillet, *La Vie de Monsieur Des-Cartes* vol. 2, 92, and generally, Popkin, "Father Mersenne's War Against Pyrrhonism."
11. See Popkin, "Skepticism and the Counter-Reformation in France," 81 n. 76.
12. See Silhon, *De L'immortalité de l'âme*, 124–26, reproduced at Descartes, AT XII, 465–66, and translated by Clarke, *Descartes: A Biography*, 190–91.
13. Silhon, *De la certitude des connoissances humaines*, 46–76; Silhon, *De L'immortalité de l'âme*, 72–80, 105.
14. Schmitt, "The Recovery and Assimilation of Ancient Scepticism," 384.
15. Fortuna and Merisalo, "The First Latin Translation of Sextus Empiricus," 57.
16. Floridi, "The Diffusion of Sextus Empiricus's Works," 66.
17. Popkin, "Sources of Knowledge of Sextus Empiricus," 137.
18. Floridi, *Sextus Empiricus*, 51, echoing his "The Diffusion of Sextus Empiricus's Works," 82.
19. Popkin, "Skepticism and the Counter-Reformation in France," 62, 64; Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 70–79. Discrediting Calvinism and other reformed creeds was also the avowed aim of Hervey in making Sextus available in Latin (*ibid.*, 68–69).
20. See Tamura, "Trace of Stoic Logic in Descartes." The usage is unique in Descartes's own writings as Tamura notes, while it occurs also (in the genitive *pronuntiati*) in the Latin version of the *Discourse on Method* that appeared in Amsterdam in 1644, and at the point of elaboration of the *Cogito* and its necessary truth (AT VI, 558). That translation came with the author's introductory endorsement, approving it as a faithful rendering of his French original (AT VI, 539). The occurrence, and the fact that Descartes had reviewed the translation (which may have looked back in passages on the *Cogito* to Descartes's Latin in the *Meditations*, published three years earlier), may strengthen Tamura's case.
21. Cicero's passage makes clear that "he would use the term *pronuntiatum* until he could find a better one"; and "We know [from *De Fato* I, and the testimony of Apuleius] that Cicero did find a better one—*enuntiatio*," while Gellius, who records Cicero's term, reports that Varro designated *axiōma* by *proloquium* (Mates, *Stoic Logic*, 28). One could also consider as a possible influence on Descartes's usage the occurrences of *pronuntiatum* in Book II, Aphorism 4 of Bacon's *Novum Organum* (we can deduce from Descartes's correspondence that he had some familiarity with Bacon's works: AT I, 109, 195, 251)—but that would open whole other horizons to survey.

Disclosure statement

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