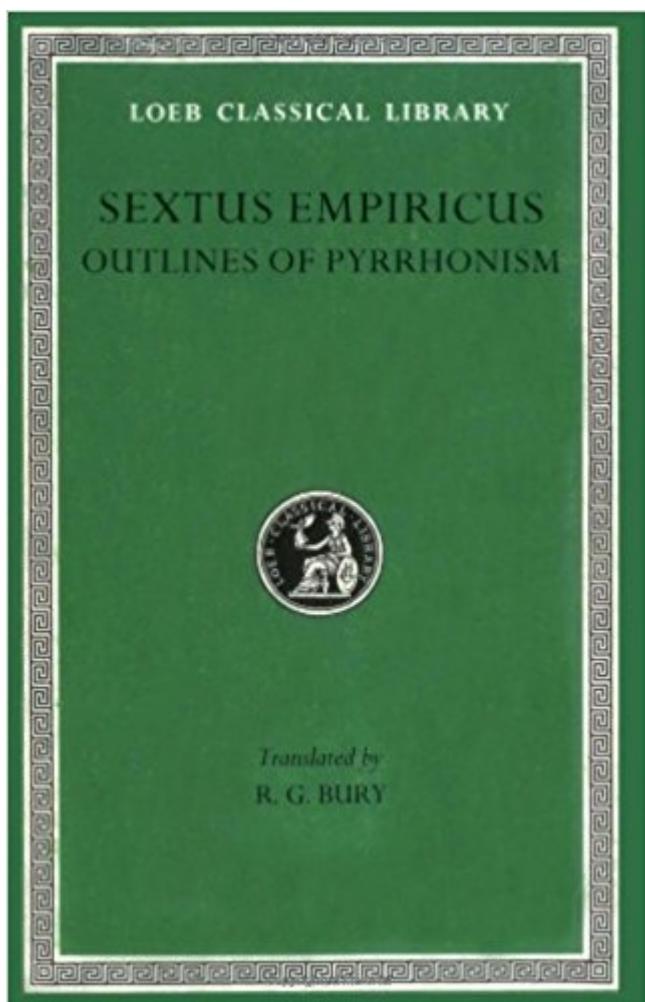


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Sextus Empiricus: Outlines Of Pyrrhonism (Loeb Classical Library No. 273)



Synopsis

Sextus Empiricus (ca. 160–210 CE), exponent of scepticism and critic of the Dogmatists, was a Greek physician and philosopher, pupil and successor of the medical sceptic Herodotus (not the historian) of Tarsus. He probably lived for years in Rome and possibly also in Alexandria and Athens. His three surviving works are 'Outlines of Pyrrhonism' (three books on the practical and ethical scepticism of Pyrrho of Elis, ca. 360–275 BCE, as developed later, presenting also a case against the Dogmatists); 'Against the Dogmatists' (five books dealing with the Logicians, the Physicists, and the Ethicists); and 'Against the Professors' (six books: Grammarians, Rhetors, Geometers, Arithmeticians, Astrologers, and Musicians). These two latter works might be called a general criticism of professors of all arts and sciences. Sextus's work is a valuable source for the history of thought especially because of his development and formulation of former sceptic doctrines. The Loeb Classical Library edition of Sextus Empiricus is in four volumes.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The book is nicely and durably hard-bound in a very handy format, has good paper, an excellent, readable typeface, the original ancient Greek text facing the translation page by page. It is excellently introduced and commented by the translator, Professor R. G. Bury, whereby a knowledge of Latin is assumed for occasional quotations from this language. The nearly always helpful footnotes cross-reference not only this book but also the other works by Sextus Empiricus. Only in one instance - the translator's critique of the author's etymology for 'void' - did this reviewer

find a footnote not convincing. This book is a summary and an introduction to the other works of the Hellenistic sceptical philosopher Sextus Empiricus. Why were his works not part of the curriculum when the reviewer studied philosophy for several semesters decades ago? Why was 'scepticism', when not ignored altogether, considered a mere negation rather than 'suspension of judgement' leading to 'ataraxia', often translated as 'tranquillity' or 'mental imperturbability'? It is amazing that Sextus Empiricus' books survived at all, given their ability to wash away dogmatic systems - philosophical, scientific and religious - like elaborate sand castles at high tide. Dogmatists of all sorts - especially those earning their livelihoods and / or maintaining their powers by propagating some dogmatic system - unable to refute the arguments - apparently simply ignored sceptical works or, when this was not possible, deliberately misrepresented this philosophic school. Even today, a search engine including some 20 English language dictionaries shows only one definition of 'Pyrrhonism' that mentions the central notion of 'suspension of judgement' and none at all that mention 'ataraxia'. Sextus Empiricus, by contrast, gave excellent positive, unbiased summaries of the various dogmatic schools he patiently refuted by multiple arguments. The last paragraph of the book 'Why the Sceptic sometimes purposely propounds Arguments which are lacking in Power and Persuasion' in respect of the 'rashness and conceit' of the Dogmatists demonstrates the benign, well-wishing disposition of the author. Finally, decades after having formally studied philosophy, the reviewer is very happy to study the Sceptical School. Better late than never!

This book explains a very thoughtful, rigorously worked out consideration of the following perplexing observation, which is one I think we all share: "I do not seem to know anything for certain." By having so carefully considered this issue, I believe that this ancient book represents a coherent and complete answer to the predicaments that modern skeptics so worry and strain themselves over; for example, it achieves Sartre's own goal, which was to "work out a coherent atheism," and did so 2000 years before Sartre was born. The Outlines, like the other extant works of Sextus Empiricus, is largely a recording of teachings attributed to a Greek philosopher of the 4th c. B.C. named Pyrrho of Elis. Pyrrho is a shadowy figure and himself left no extant writings, but is believed by longstanding rumor (preserved most quote-ably by the Roman historian Diogenes Laertius) to have been influenced by Buddhism during his travels with Alexander the Great to India. Pyrrho's thought influenced middle and later phases of Plato's Academy and flourished there for some centuries, where it was intensely worked and re-worked. Indeed, Pyrrho's thought ultimately exerted such great influence in classical civilization that his name became synonymous with the modern technical meaning of the word "skepticism" (in fact, the title of this work, which in Greek is "Pyrrhoniae

Hypothesi," is sometimes translated as "Outlines of Skepticism"). Ancient skepticism fell into obscurity following the fall of Rome and languished in obscurity for nearly a millennium. Fortunately, however, the works of Sextus were rediscovered during the Italian Renaissance and from there enjoyed wide attention in Europe for some centuries, impacting the works of such notable figures as Montaigne and Walter Raleigh. Nevertheless, ancient skepticism again fell out of academic view in more recent times. This is peculiar and unfortunate; this body of thought was no less influential than Platonic, Aristotelian, and other classical movements now effectively canonized in Western culture and was kept well in the forefront of academic thought for many centuries, but is now largely a curiosity seriously studied only by specialist philosophers and classics scholars. What is most interesting to me about ancient skepticism is that I think everything that could possibly be said by modern doubters -- the phenomenologists, the existentialists, the mass of usually unthinking and poorly educated oafs who call themselves postmodernists -- was already said by the ancients. Indeed, the absolutely key points that a doubter must make in order to render his doubts even coherent all appear in the Outlines, in my opinion, and I see nothing in the supposedly radical works of modern day doubters that is really more radical than what is contained in Sextus. Finally, there is no better introduction to ancient skepticism than the Outlines. Sextus is unbelievably straightforward and easy to understand, especially if you have any experience reading other works of skepticism. Personally, I think the Barnes & Annas translation, available in an in-print Cambridge University edition, is better because it is better suited to modern readers and is copiously annotated. However, this or any other edition will do for a non-specialist looking for an understanding ancient skepticism.

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