

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION TO
SKEPTICISM

Allan Hazlett



A Critical Introduction to Skepticism

Bloomsbury Critical Introductions to Contemporary Epistemology

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**BLOOMSBURY CRITICAL INTRODUCTIONS
TO CONTEMPORARY EPISTEMOLOGY**

A Critical Introduction to Skepticism

ALLAN HAZLETT

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I should like to pause here and spend some time in the contemplation of God; to reflect on his attributes, and to gaze with wonder and adoration on the beauty of this immense light, so far as the eye of my darkened intellect can bear it. For just as we believe through faith that the supreme happiness of the next life consists solely in the contemplation of the divine majesty, so experience tells us that this same contemplation, albeit much less perfect, enables us to know the greatest joy of which we are capable in this life.

— DESCARTES, THIRD MEDITATION

In a word, human life is more governed by fortune than by reason; is to be regarded more as a dull pastime than as a serious occupation; and is more influenced by particular humour, than by general principles. Shall we engage ourselves in it with passion and anxiety? It is not worthy of so much concern. Shall we be indifferent about what happens? We lose all the pleasure of the game by our phlegm and carelessness. While we are reasoning concerning life, life is gone; and death, though perhaps they receive him differently, yet treats alike the fool and the philosopher. To reduce life to exact rule and method, is commonly a painful, oft a fruitless occupation: And is it not also a proof, that we overvalue the prize for which we contend? Even to reason so carefully concerning it, and to fix with accuracy its just idea, would be overvaluing it, were it not that, to some tempers, this occupation is one of the most amusing, in which life could possibly be employed.

— HUME, "THE SCEPTIC"

Contents

Series Editor's Preface viii

Epistle to the Reader ix

PART ONE Skepticism 1

1 The Skeptical Persuasion 3

2 The Mode from Dispute 37

3 Our Infirm Understanding 55

4 Our Darkened Intellect 71

PART TWO Anti-Skepticism 105

5 The Moorean Persuasion 107

6 Nonclosure 127

7 Skepticism and Language 141

PART THREE New Directions 157

8 Beyond Propositional Knowledge 159

9 Skepsis and Praxis 173

Notes 187

Bibliography 199

Index 209

Series Editor's Preface

It would be an exaggeration to say that philosophy is nothing without epistemology. But this much is true: philosophy *has* long been greatly enriched and empowered by epistemology. At times, epistemology has been the lungs of philosophy. It has never been far from philosophy's elusive heart. Epistemology discusses such apparent phenomena as knowledge, evidence, reason, perception, memory, probability, testimony, fallibility, and more. It discusses methods of inquiry, too – including methods that might underlie all philosophical thought. Self-awareness, inference, intuition, hypothesizing, doubting, and so on: methods as fundamental as these fall within the epistemological gaze.

This is where Bloomsbury's series, *Critical Introductions to Contemporary Epistemology*, enters the philosophical ferment. The series consists of accessible introductions to aspects of how epistemology proceeds – its past, its present, perhaps its future.

Each book in the series brings to the fore some key epistemological concepts and methods, along with a sense of their history. Each book will guide readers to and through a central piece of the expanding puzzle that is epistemology. Each book will engage critically both with older and with newer epistemological ideas.

The series as a whole is unique – a compact reference library devoted to this central part of philosophy. Advanced philosophy students, graduate students, professional philosophers, and others wishing to partake of epistemology's opportunities, challenges, and skirmishes will welcome this series.

Stephen Hetherington

The University of New South Wales, Australia

Editor-in-Chief, *Bloomsbury Critical Introductions to Contemporary Epistemology*

Epistle to the Reader

Bryan Frances writes that understanding the problem posed by skepticism is a precondition for being an analytic philosopher.¹ I'll go further: if you don't understand the problem posed by skepticism, you're doomed.² You may not suffer all that much for it—it's not that kind of "doom"—but it'll be bad.

Understanding the problem posed by skepticism can be hard. Part of the reason is that such understanding can be unpleasant, in such a way that we would prefer not to understand the problem. The seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes described skeptical uncertainty and doubt as "deep waters, where ... we may lose our footing."³ That sounds scary, but the metaphor is illuminating in a way that Descartes didn't intend. One way to avoid drowning in the deep waters of skepticism, and this was what Descartes was suggesting, is to find or build something solid to stand on—to get out of the deep water. But there's an alternative: stay in the deep water, and learn to swim. With the right skills, deep water isn't as scary as it seems, and I hope this book will help you develop some of those skills.

To understand the problem posed by skepticism, you have to see both sides. Given what I said above, therefore, if you don't see both sides, you're doomed. If you think that skepticism is obviously true, you're doomed. If you think it's obviously false, you're doomed. I hope this book will give you a sense of the plausibility and the implausibility of the various things one can say about the problem posed by skepticism. Only if we have a sense of this will we be able to understand the problem.

The problem posed by skepticism is sometimes called a "paradox." A paradox involves a set of claims that strike us as true, but which are mutually inconsistent. Paradoxes are worth appreciating, but to appreciate them you have to see how each of the inconsistent claims is plausible. To see this, you need to explore the possibility of denying each of them. If the problem posed by skepticism is a paradox, then you need to engage with it, and attempt to solve the paradox (even if this cannot be done). Otherwise, you will not be able to understand the problem. (And if you haven't engaged with the problem posed by skepticism, you should refrain from calling it a "paradox"; that's a bit like a celibate monk complaining about how annoying romantic relationships can be.)

Let me say something about how to use this book. This book is intended as

a companion to the philosophical texts that it discusses. If your only source of information about the problem of skepticism is this book, apologies, but again: you're doomed. You need to read the texts listed under "Readings" at the end of each chapter. I do not think you should even begin without laying your hands on copies of Hume's *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (see Chapter 3) and Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* (see Chapter 4).

You should make use of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu/>) and *Philosophy Compass* ([http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1747-9991](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1747-9991)), but there is no substitute for careful, sometimes painful, engagement with the original work of other philosophers.

This book offers an introduction to skepticism in contemporary epistemology, and presupposes no prior familiarity with the subject, but it is argumentative. I say many controversial things in this book; in some cases I give arguments for what I say, in other cases I simply note how things seem to me. I do not pretend to be neutral; those who engage in that sort of pretense rarely succeed in fooling anyone, and usually end up misleading at least some of their readers. But although this book is a kind of polemic, my aim isn't to convince you of anything: my aim is to give you some tools that will enable you to sensibly make up your own mind. And you will need to make up your own mind about the problem posed by skepticism; otherwise, you guessed it, you're doomed.

There are many important and interesting philosophical issues that are not discussed here. However, I have provided a bibliography that I think will be sufficient to get you started on your further research into skepticism and related epistemological issues. (Citations are given by author and year, and refer to entries in the bibliography.)

While writing this book I enjoyed the hospitality of the philosophy department at the University of New Mexico; to the philosophers there I owe thanks. I should also like to thank Brian Johnson and Duncan Pritchard, who provided feedback on earlier versions of this material.

Allan Hazlett

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PART ONE

Skepticism

1

The Skeptical Persuasion

The word “skeptic” comes from the Ancient Greek word *σκέπτομαι*, which means to look at, or (in a philosophical context) to inquire. But the distinctively skeptical activity isn’t inquiry—non-skeptics, after all, also inquire—but rather a particular way of proceeding in inquiry. The skeptic’s distinctive activity is asking the question: “How do you know?” This question, which is both a challenge and a request for reasons or explanation, is at the heart of the suspicion about knowledge that underlies all skepticism.

This book provides an introduction to skepticism in contemporary epistemology. We will focus on a species of skepticism known as “Cartesian skepticism” (§4.2.1). For the sake of our study of skepticism in contemporary epistemology, we’ll first trace the history of skeptical thought from its origins in Ancient Greece through to its revival in Early Modern Europe.¹ In looking at the history of skepticism we’ll be able to introduce some distinctions and ideas that are essential for understanding skepticism in contemporary epistemology. Our survey will, of necessity, be brief. (For further study, see this chapter’s “Readings.”)

1.1 The Ancient skeptics

The philosophical scene in Ancient Greece was a factional affair. European philosophy since the Ancient period has been contested by schoolmen, rationalists, empiricists, Kantians, Hegelians, existentialists, and logical positivists; in Ancient Greece the contestants were (among others) Stoics, Epicureans, Cynics, Peripatetics, and skeptics. Academics and Pyrrhonians (more on which distinction below, §1.3.3) were species of skeptic, and their thinking can only be understood in the context of their opposition to other philosophical “schools”: the skeptics were essentially opposed to the Stoics, who maintained that knowledge is possible.

To get a sense of what motivated the Ancient skeptics, it's helpful to picture the philosophical landscape with which they were confronted. Consider the metaphysical scene, where a basic question concerned the fundamental constitution of material things (Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Scepticism*, III 30–2), and various people claimed to know the answer: Thales said that it was water, while Diogenes of Appolonia said air; Democritus and Epicurus said that everything was made of atoms, while Pythagoras said numbers; the Stoics said there were four elements (earth, air, fire, and water), while Aristotle said five (adding ether, which constitutes the heavenly spheres). Seemingly intractable disagreement was everywhere. Or consider the state of Ancient ethics (*ibid.* III 180–96): Epicurus said that pleasure was the highest good, while Antisthenes said that it was downright bad (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, IX 101); Peripatetics said that external things were necessary for living well, while Stoics denied this. Again, seemingly intractable disagreement was everywhere. The Ancient skeptics were frustrated by philosophy's inability to make progress on even the most basic questions, and they draw a natural conclusion: these questions cannot be answered. Thus a fundamental motivation for Ancient skepticism was the persistence of philosophical disagreement.

Ancient skepticism grew out of several other intellectual traditions. The skeptics had philosophical affinities with the Eleatics (who argued that motion is an illusion), with Heraclitus and Democritus (who rejected unreliable human perception in favor of speculative metaphysics), and with Protagoras (whose relativism was based on many of the same premises to which the skeptics appealed).² Pyrrhonian skepticism was a cousin of Medical Empiricism, a school of medicine that eschewed theoretical, physiological explanations in favor of medical treatment based on experience alone.³ And both Academics and Pyrrhonians (as well as just about every philosopher of their day) considered themselves to be fulfilling the legacy of Socrates. A disposition to inquiry, as opposed to forming an opinion, is embodied in the character of Socrates, who describes his philosophical practice in Plato's *Apology* as one of investigating, with the aim of determining if anyone is wise (20d–24a). The affinity between Socrates and the Ancient skeptics is most evident when we consider his famous interpretation of the Delphic oracle. The oracle had said that no one was wiser than Socrates, and in response Socrates began to search for counterexamples—incidentally, a most skeptical way of handling the pronouncements of an oracle. Having examined someone famous for his wisdom, but finding him not to be wise at all, Socrates concluded:

[I]t is likely that neither of us know anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know,

neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent. (21d)⁴

In his tentative conclusion that he does not know anything (or, at least, not anything worthwhile), Socrates anticipated the Academics and the Pyrrhonians.

Who were the Academic skeptics, and what was their philosophical position? The Academics are so-named because they were members of the Academy that Plato founded (c. 387 BC); they included **Arcesilaus** (315–240 BC), who was head of the Academy after Plato, and **Carneades** (214/13–129/8 BC), who succeeded Arcesilaus. In their time, the Academics were one of the important interlocutors of the Stoics, and the Academics' skepticism was essentially opposed to Stoic epistemology, on which some things are apprehensible (*καταληπτική*), i.e. (on an equally good translation) on which knowledge is possible. The Academic skeptics rejected this.⁵

Although this framework is not uncontroversial (cf. §1.4), we'll assume that there are three possible attitudes you can take towards the proposition that *p*, when you consider the question of whether *p*: belief that *p*, disbelief that *p*, i.e. belief that $\sim p$ (where ' \sim ' means 'not'), and suspension of judgment about whether *p*. What is suspension of judgment? Although it is incompatible with belief and disbelief, it is not the same as neither believing nor disbelieving; my kitchen table neither believes nor disbelieves that the moon is made of cheese, but my table does not suspend judgment about that proposition. Neither is suspension of judgment the same as neither believing nor disbelieving, for a creature capable of belief (about the relevant proposition): if you have never considered the question of whether the moon is made of cheese, you do not suspend judgment about that proposition. We can say at least this much: suspension of judgment about whether *p* only occurs after someone has considered the question of whether *p*, or after she has engaged in inquiry about whether *p* (cf. Barnes 1990, p. 9). But once you have considered the question of whether *p*, or engaged in inquiry about whether *p*, you have only three options: believe that *p*, disbelieve that *p*, or suspend judgment about whether *p*.

Let's turn to the Pyrrhonian skeptics. Who were they, and what was their philosophical position? They got their name from **Pyrrho of Elis** (c. 360–c. 270 BC), a philosophical contemporary of Socrates about whom little is known, and who (like Socrates) left no writings behind. He may have picked up his skeptical ideas from Indian ascetics he met while traveling with Alexander the Great's expedition to Asia. Pyrrhonian skepticism officially begins with **Aenesidemus** (first century BC), a member of the Academy who broke ranks with his fellow Academics on the grounds that they had abandoned the skepticism of Pyrrho and Socrates. For Aenesidemus and the Pyrrhonians

that followed him, skepticism was a way of life, the essence of which was suspension of judgment (*ἐποχή*). Moreover, such suspension of judgment was taken to lead to tranquility (*ἀταραξία*), or freedom from disturbance. Theirs was thus an ethical philosophy, in the sense that it offered an answer to the question of how to live, or to flourish, or to be happy.

In this book we'll not examine the idea that suspension of judgment leads to tranquility, but I'll very briefly sketch two Pyrrhonian ideas. The first is that we are often disturbed as a result of our evaluative beliefs, i.e. our beliefs about what is good or bad. Diogenes Laertius relates the following story about Pyrrho:

When his fellow-passengers on board a ship were all unnerved by a storm, he kept calm and confident, pointing to a little pig in the ship that went on eating, and telling them that such was the unperturbed state in which the wise man should keep himself. (*Lives*, XI 68)⁶

What explained the difference between Pyrrho (and the pig) and the other passengers? So the story goes, this was down to their cognitive difference: Pyrrho (and the pig) lacked beliefs to the effect that going down with the ship would be bad, while the other passengers held this opinion, and so were terrified. Evaluative beliefs have emotional consequences—someone who thinks honor is good will be frustrated when she fails to acquire honor—but if you remove the evaluative beliefs, so the argument goes, you'll remove their emotional consequences (Sextus, *Outlines*, I 27, III 237–8). But suspension of judgment is not always calming, even when it comes to evaluative matters: if you very much want to eat at the best restaurant in town, suspension of judgment about the question of which restaurant is the best will hardly bring you tranquility. The second Pyrrhonian idea is that unsuccessful inquiry or unresolved disagreement about certain questions is disturbing, but that suspension of judgment can alleviate this (Sextus, *Outlines*, I 25). Suspension of judgment about a controversial issue can put an end to the frustration of trying to settle the matter. But this will not always work: if you are deeply curious about some question, suspension of judgment will not bring you tranquility, since it is your lack of belief about said question that is the source of your disturbance.

In any event, probably the most important thing about the Ancient skeptics was their rejection of the view that knowledge is necessary, if not sufficient, for living a good life. Stoics and Peripatetics defended this, Christians later took this view up, and many contemporary philosophers defend it. The Ancient skeptics rejected it.⁷

1.2 Ancient skeptical arguments

Our most important sources of information about Ancient skepticism are the writings of **Sextus Empiricus** (second century AD). Most of what we know about Pyrrhonian skepticism is based on Sextus' sympathetic presentation of it. In this section, we'll take a quick look at some of the skeptical arguments that Sextus presents in his most famous book, *Outlines of Scepticism*. These include the ten modes (§1.2.1) and the five modes, under which heading we'll discuss "Agrippa's trilemma" and the "problem of the criterion" (§1.2.2). These arguments have had a tremendous influence on subsequent philosophers, and the ten modes are the historical ancestors of the "Cartesian skeptical argument" (§4.2.1) that has been at the center of contemporary discussions of skepticism. I should note that, in distinguishing these arguments—the ten modes, the five modes, Agrippa's trilemma, the problem of the criterion—I do not mean to suggest that it would not be right to say that these are really just different ways of articulating the same basic skeptical idea. (The Pyrrhonians, for their part, would have seen the modes as a battery of tools for inducing suspension of judgment.) However, although there are many different arguments that are recognizable as "skeptical arguments," it would be foolish to try to find out which of these was "the" skeptical argument. It would be foolish to argue about which articulation was most "genuine" or "real." In any event, we'll adopt the practice here of engaging with arguments as they are articulated, and not worry too much about how individual articulations are related to one another, or to some unarticulated skeptical ideal.

1.2.1 The ten modes

The **ten modes** (*Outlines*, I 35–163) are not ten distinct skeptical arguments, but more like ten ways of applying a particular form of skeptical argument. The ten modes are sometimes attributed to Aenesidemus, and are thought to have their origin in Academic skepticism. These "modes" would have been methods of bringing about suspension of judgment (or for arguing for the conclusion that nothing can be known). The ten modes have the following three-step structure:

- 1 Each mode begins with the skeptic drawing our attention to some form of difference in opinion or difference in how things appear, in other words, some form of disagreement. Colors appear differently to human beings and other animals ("the mode depending on variations among animals"), food tastes different depending on what you've just eaten ("the mode depending on circumstances"), people from

different cultures consider different practices immoral (“the mode depending on persuasions and customs and laws and belief in myths and dogmatic suppositions”).

- 2 The skeptic then argues that there is no legitimate way to decide which side of the disagreement is right; she thus reaches a state of equipollence in which the considerations on both sides of the disagreement appear equally compelling.
- 3 Finally, as a result, the skeptic suspends judgment about the relevant question (or concludes that knowledge about the answer to that question is impossible): about the color of the object, or the flavor of the food, or the morality of such-and-such practice.

That is the basic three-step structure of the ten modes: a disagreement, where there is no legitimate way to decide which side of the disagreement is right, resulting in suspension of judgment.

Let’s look more closely at one of these modes. Sextus argues that “objects appear different” depending on their “positions and intervals and places” (I 118).⁸ For example (when it comes to intervals):

[T]he same colonnade appears foreshortened when seen from one end, but completely symmetrical when seen from the middle. The same boat appears from a distance small and stationary, but from close at hand large and in motion. The same tower appears from a distance round, but from close at hand square. (*Ibid.*)

But it is “impossible ... to give preference to some of these appearances over others;” and therefore:

Since ... all apparent things are observed in some place and for some interval and in some position, and each of these produces a great deal of variation in appearances ... we shall be forced to arrive at suspension of judgment. (I 121)

But why not give preference to some of these appearances over others? Don’t we, for example, have a *better* view of the boat and the tower when they are close at hand? What Sextus says here (and in connection with others of the ten modes) is that legitimately giving preference to one appearance over another would require giving a proof that your choice was right, and that this would in turn require giving a proof that your proof was sound, and so on *ad infinitum* (I 122). This is a version of the “mode from infinite regress;” one of the five modes, which suggests that the ten modes must

be supplemented by the five modes, and in particular by Agrippa's trilemma (§1.2.2).

Although much of Sextus' discussion of the ten modes focuses on differences in sense perception, two other sorts of difference receive significant attention. First, there is considerable emphasis placed on cultural difference, especially in connection with "[t]he tenth mode, which especially bears on ethics" (but also on religious metaphysics), which "is the one depending on persuasions and customs and laws and beliefs in myth and dogmatic suppositions" (I 145; see e.g. I 145–62, III 199–228). Sextus offers a battery of examples of cultural difference: "Ethiopians tattoo their babies, while we do not" (I 148), "no male here would wear a brightly-colored full-length dress, although among the Persians this, which among us is shameful, is thought highly becoming" (III 204), and "[n]one of the devotees of Zeus Casius at Pelusim would consume an onion, just as no Priest of Libyan Aphrodite would taste garlic" (III 224). Sextus would have been familiar with the surprising stories of difference related in the *Histories* of Herodotus, and of "the wonderful forms of different nations" described in Pliny's *Natural History* (Book 7, Chapter 2). Second, similar emphasis is placed on philosophical differences about ethical (as well as metaphysical and theological) matters (cf. §1.1, and see e.g. III 179–232). The Pyrrhonian skeptic, as described by Sextus, is deeply suspicious of the efforts of theoretical philosophers, and in particular of ethicists who theorize about what is good and bad "by nature." Attending to the reality of difference, both cultural and philosophical, puts the lie to all such ethical theories, with their pretensions to universality. In this connection, we should consider also the mode "depending on the differences among humans", where emphasis is placed on individual differences in perception, emotion, and preference (I 79–90). In any event, this skeptical emphasis on various kinds of difference, as against would-be universal theories of the good life, would be revived in the Early Modern period (cf. §1.6). And the debate between ethicists who appeal to human nature and those who reject such appeals continues in contemporary philosophy; consider, for example, the dispute between neo-Aristotelian virtue ethicists and anti-essentialist inheritors of existentialism.

A final comment on the ten modes. The Ancient skeptics anticipated Early Modern and contemporary discussions of skepticism in many ways (cf. §1.2.2), but when it comes to the "Cartesian skeptical argument", which was to play such a decisive role in Early Modern and contemporary epistemology, there is no version obviously to be found in Ancient philosophy (cf. Burnyeat 1982, Bermudez 2008, Williams 2010). Two Ancient skeptical arguments are worth mentioning in this connection. First, Sextus argues that "[d]ifferent appearances come about depending on sleeping or waking", and thus "the existence or non-existence of the objects becomes not absolute but relative"

(I 104; see also Cicero, *On Academic Scepticism*, 2.88). Second, the Ancient skeptics seemed to have appealed to the possibility of misleading sense impressions, indistinguishable from veridical sense impressions, in advancing their skeptical agenda. Here is **Cicero** (106–43 BC):

[S]ome impressions are true, others false; and a false impression isn't apprehensible; but every true impression is such that one could also have had a false impression just like it. And when two impressions are such that they don't differ at all, it isn't possible that one of them is apprehensible, while the other isn't. Therefore, no impression is apprehensible. (*Scepticism*, 2.40)⁹

The seeds of the “Cartesian skeptical argument” are here. We'll return to that argument, below (§4.2.1).

1.2.2 The five modes

The most influential set of Ancient skeptical arguments is the **five modes** (Sextus, *Outlines*, I 164–77; cf. Diogenes, *Lives*, IX 88–9), often called the five modes of **Agrippa** (first century AD). About Agrippa we know nothing apart from the fact that the five modes are attributed to him by Diogenes Laertius (*Lives*, IX 88). Here we shall briefly survey the five modes—they all have descendants in later philosophy, and we'll give them further scrutiny below. The five modes are:

- 1 The mode from dispute
- 2 The mode from infinite regress
- 3 The mode from relativity
- 4 The mode from hypothesis
- 5 The reciprocal mode

The mode from infinite regress, the mode from hypothesis, and the reciprocal mode together constitute a powerful and important skeptical argument known as **Agrippa's trilemma**.¹⁰ The best way to see how the trilemma works is to imagine a conversation between a Pyrrhonian skeptic and someone who asserts that p ; call the latter the “claimant.” The skeptic asks the claimant to defend her assertion that p . Suppose she appeals at this point to the fact that q_1 . The skeptic then asks the claimant to defend her assertion that q_1 . And so on for additional assertions that q_2 , that q_3 , and so on. At any point at which the claimant appeals to the fact that q_i , and the

skeptic asks her to defend her assertion that q_i , one of three things might happen:

- 1 The claimant cannot defend q_i . Perhaps she thinks q_i is obviously true; perhaps she thinks that there are good reasons for q_i but doesn't know what they are; perhaps she thinks that there are good reasons for q_i that she can't put into words. In any event, the claimant's defense of her original assertion that p comes to an end with her making an assertion that she cannot defend; she has begun "from something which [she does not] establish but claim[s] to assume simply and without proof in virtue of a concession" (Sextus, *Outlines*, I 168). This, so the argument goes, makes the claimant's defense illegitimate, and by applying the **mode from hypothesis**, the skeptic suspends judgment about whether p .
- 2 The claimant appeals to the fact that p , in defense of her claim that q_i . The claimant's defense of her original claim that p involves her appealing to the fact that p , and so "what ought to be confirmatory of the object under investigation needs to be made convincing by the object under investigation" (I 169). This, so the argument goes, makes the claimant's defense illegitimate, and by applying the **reciprocal mode**, the skeptic suspends judgment about whether p .
- 3 The claimant appeals to the fact that q_{i+1} , in defense of her claim that q_i , and then to the fact that q_{i+2} , in defense of her claim that q_{i+1} , and so on. The claimant's defense of her original claim never comes to an end, and "what is brought forward as a source of conviction for the matter proposed itself needs another source, which itself needs another, and so *ad infinitum*, so that we have no point from which to begin to establish anything" (I 166). This, so the argument goes, makes the claimant's defense illegitimate, and by applying the **mode from infinite regress**, the skeptic suspends judgment about whether p .

Furthermore, it is suggested, these are the only three possibilities: either the claimant's defense terminates with her appeal to the fact that q_i (in which case the mode from hypothesis kicks in), her defense terminates with her appeal to the fact that p (in which case the reciprocal mode kicks in), or her defense does not terminate (in which case the mode deriving from infinite regress kicks in). Therefore, in any event, the skeptic will suspend judgment about whether p . As well, it is notable that we needed to assume nothing about the proposition that p to advance the argument. If the argument is sound, it would apply with complete generality for any proposition (cf. §1.3.2).

Agrippa's trilemma is a fascinating argument, and epistemologists have struggled with it for millennia. Each horn of the trilemma makes an assumption about the legitimacy of a certain form of argument: the first horn assumes that an argument is illegitimate if you can't argue for its premises, the second horn assumes that circular arguments are illegitimate, and the third horn assumes that arguments with an infinite number of premises are illegitimate. These assumptions could be challenged—and the critical discussion of these assumptions composes the contemporary epistemological issue of the "structure of justification." (For more on this issue, see this chapter's "Readings.") But the trilemma, as formulated, also seems to make a more basic assumption: that you ought to suspend judgment about whether *p* if a legitimate defense of the assertion that *p* cannot be provided. When we turn to Hume's version of this argument (§3.1), I'll argue that an assumption like this is ultimately what weakens it (§3.2.2).

The trilemma is implicated in another Ancient skeptical argument: the **problem of the criterion**. Probably the most exciting topic for Ancient epistemologists was the question of whether there is a "criterion" or "standard of truth," and if so, what that standard is.¹¹ The problem of the criterion grows out of a closely-related problem, the so-called **paradox of inquiry**, articulated by Meno:

How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is?
 How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know? (Plato, *Meno*, 80d)

The problem of the criterion similarly arises from a concern that knowledge always requires prior knowledge—which suggests that knowledge is impossible. A "standard of truth," as Sextus puts it, is something "by which ... reality and unreality are judged" (*Outlines*, II 14). Consider some proposition that *p*—one, say, that you are inclined to believe. What defense can you offer of your would-be belief that *p*? Whatever defense you offer, it will presuppose some principle to the effect that such-and-such is sufficient for reasonable belief. In other words, it will presuppose some standard of truth. For example, suppose you are inclined to believe that you are presently seated. In defense of this belief, you might cite the fact that you see and feel that you are seated. This defense presupposes the principle that seeing and feeling that *p* is sufficient for reasonable belief that *p*. In other words, it presupposes that sense perception is a standard of truth. But what defense can you offer for this standard? At this point, Agrippa's trilemma kicks in, and the skeptic concludes that there is no defensible standard of truth—but an indefensible standard is no standard at all, and so

there is no standard of truth (*Outlines*, I 178–9, II 14–79), and so knowledge is impossible.

As **Roderick Chisholm** (1916–99) (1982, pp. 61–5) argues, the problem of the criterion leads to the reciprocal mode: knowledge seems to require that we employ some procedure for distinguishing truth from falsity, but the legitimate employment of such a procedure seems to require that we know that said procedure is reliable, but knowing *that* seems to require that we already possess the very knowledge that we sought in the first place. A defense of sense perception as a standard of truth would surely cite, in the first instance, the reliability of sense perception. But how do we know that sense perception is reliable? It seems the only way we could know *that* would involve the employment of sense perception—but this seems to bring us straightaway to the reciprocal mode. Below, we'll further consider the problem of the criterion (§2.1) and Chisholm's articulation of it (§5.1).

The most eloquent skeptical defender of Agrippa's trilemma was David Hume, and we'll return to his argument for skepticism (§3.1), which centers on an application of the reciprocal mode.

On the **mode from relativity**, Sextus writes that "the existing object appears to be such-and-such relative to the subject judging" (*Outlines*, I 167), which is suggestive of the common structure of the ten modes (§1.2.1). The idea that perception can provide only subject-relative information, rather than knowledge of the external world, eventually found its most eloquent expression in the *Meditations* of René Descartes, to which we'll return (§4.1). The **mode from dispute**, where "undecidable dissension ... both in ordinary life and among philosophers" (I 165) leads to suspension of judgment, has received considerable attention recently; we'll return to it below (Chapter 2).

1.3 Four distinctions

In this section we'll draw four distinctions that we'll need to make sense of the various species of skepticism. We'll discuss the order of skepticism (§1.3.1), the scope of skepticism (§1.3.2), the distinction between Academic and Pyrrhonian skepticism (§1.3.3), and the modality of skepticism (§1.3.4).

1.3.1 The order of skepticism

Imagine that you believe that whales evolved from land mammals. This is what philosophers call a "first-order" belief. To see why they call it that, imagine

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