

Can an ancient Greek sceptic be *eudaimôn* (or happy)? And what difference does the answer make to us?

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The paper explores how far the ancient Greek sceptics in fact accept, and how far they should accept, the central Greek ethical notion of *eudaimonia*, usually translated "happiness" - and what, if anything, the answers may tell us today. The first section shows that sceptics of both the Academic and Pyrrhonist traditions frequently employ the notion of *eudaimonia*, apparently without discomfort. The second section draws attention to a contrast within the relevant works of Sextus Empiricus - one of them being willing to speak of the sceptic's *eudaimonia* and the other entirely avoiding this - and considers some possible reasons why, at some point in his life, Sextus might have found the notion problematic. The answers suggested are, first, that the term *eudaimonia*, at least as normally used by non-sceptical philosophers, presupposes that it is possible to rank human lives objectively in terms of their levels of well-being, and second, that the term standardly carries with it a commitment to a certain kind of long-term structure in one's life; there is at least a serious question whether either of these is consistent with sceptical suspension of judgement. The third section examines how far a sceptic could aspire to *happiness*, where this is not assumed to be equivalent to *eudaimonia*, and touches on several modern philosophers who have focused on happiness or, more generally, on well-being. The conclusions are that the notions of happiness and *eudaimonia* are closer in their presuppositions than one might have expected; that a sceptic would be well advised to avoid either one; and that this constitutes a sobering lesson for anyone today who regards values as in some sense subjective, but who aims to construct a satisfactory conception of happiness.

- I -

Aristotle takes it as obvious and generally agreed that *eudaimonia*, usually translated into English by 'happiness', is the highest good. Both ordinary people and the elite, he says, identify living well and doing well with being *eudaimôn* (NE 1095a18-20, cf. 1097b22-3). And Aristotle himself does not disagree with this assessment, even

though he thinks it is unhelpful by itself, seeing that it leaves quite open what it is, more specifically, to live well. To be *eudaimôn*, then, according to Aristotle – and, he claims, according to almost everyone else (1095a17-18) – is simply for one’s life to go well, and his task in the *Ethics* is to pin down more precisely what that consists in. The English word ‘happy’ does not precisely correspond to this, although no single English word will do better as a translation. Happiness does not necessarily have to do with living well in general; we can speak of being happy at an instant – the question ‘are you happy now?’ is perfectly sensible in some contexts. But there is also a prominent usage of the English word ‘happy’ where it does refer to a state in which, at least from one’s own perspective, one’s life in general is going well; ‘are you happy?’ can very well mean something like ‘is your life working out for you as you would wish?’, not ‘do you feel content right now?’ When I speak of happiness interchangeably with *eudaimonia*, then, I will be using it in this more general sense; in this usage ‘happiness’ is at least a serviceable translation for the Greek word, even if (for reasons we will get to) still not a perfect one. But since it is not perfect, I will also continue to use both the noun *eudaimonia* and the adjective *eudaimôn* on a regular basis.

If *eudaimonia*, *per se*, refers simply to one’s life going well, it may seem unsurprising that all the major ancient Greek sceptics, of both the Academic and the Pyrrhonist traditions, speak of *eudaimonia* as something the sceptic aspires to along with everyone else. For ancient philosophy in general, unlike much philosophy today, has an essentially practical character; one’s philosophy is something that affects the way one lives one’s life – or at the very least, must be capable of being incorporated into one’s life. Certainly this is how the ancient sceptics conceived it. And so one way for them to recommend their philosophical outlook was to insist that that outlook not only could be incorporated into one’s life, but also resulted in one’s life going *well* – in other words, in *eudaimonia*.

For the Academics Arcesilaus and Carneades, as reported by Sextus Empiricus, the topic of happiness seems to arise in the context of a response to the familiar *apraxia*

objection: how is it even possible to live as a sceptic? In particular, how is it possible for someone who claims to hold no beliefs about the nature of things to make choices between alternative courses of action? Arcesilaus responds, according to Sextus, by saying that the sceptic's choices will be based on what is 'reasonable' (*M* 7.158), and that by choosing and acting in this way he will achieve happiness, which is also identified – though Sextus does not explicitly present this as part of what Arcesilaus himself said – as the end (*telos*) of life. And Carneades responds with an elaborate account of a decision procedure based on 'persuasive appearances' (*M* 7.166-89); persuasiveness, it is pointed out, comes in different levels, and it is the highest level of persuasiveness that is said to be appropriate for 'matters that pertain to happiness' (184). Again it is possible that the reference to happiness is Sextus', not Carneades' own; but there is no particular reason to think so. The details of both Arcesilaus' and Carneades' arguments are complicated and a matter of much debate. There is also a difficult question as to whether they intend these arguments as their own, or whether they are telling their opponents, in a purely dialectical spirit, what *they* ought to think about these issues<sup>1</sup>. But whatever the answers to these questions, it looks as if both these Academics are concerned to show that happiness is just as feasible on sceptical principles as on non-sceptical ones.

The Pyrrhonists go further. Not only are they much more explicit than the Academics that happiness is something sceptics secure for *themselves* (and for anyone else who comes to accept their message). They also consistently portray the Pyrrhonist as *better off* in this respect than everyone else – or at least, than other philosophers; the Pyrrhonists are happy, and philosophers of other persuasions are not. This appears to be the case – although the evidence is fragmentary – even in the earliest phase of Pyrrhonism, in the person of Pyrrho himself and his disciple Timon. In the single most important text relating to Pyrrho's philosophy, a summary by the Peripatetic Aristocles of an account by Timon, we are told that 'the person who is to be happy' (Aristocles in

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<sup>1</sup> For good recent surveys of these issues, with extensive bibliographies, see Brittain (2005) and Allen (2004).

Eusebius, *Praep. evang.* 14.18.2) must address certain central questions, to which the passage then gives the answers. And several other fragments of Timon emphasize how far other thinkers, those who do not answer these questions in the manner recommended, are from the tranquillity (*ataraxia*) that Pyrrho, according to the passage of Aristocles, apparently takes happiness to consist in<sup>2</sup>. The same combination of ideas appears in a rather more focused way in a summary by Photius of a work entitled *Pyrrhonist Discourses* by Aenesidemus, the originator of the later Pyrrhonist tradition (*Bibl.* 169b18-170b35). The Pyrrhonist is happy, we are told (169b27), whereas other thinkers ‘wear themselves out in vain with ceaseless torments’ (169b24); though the character of the Pyrrhonist’s happiness is not specified, the contrasting description of the non-Pyrrhonists’ state again suggests that it was some form of tranquillity. And this is explicit in Sextus Empiricus, the one ancient Greek sceptic of whom we have substantial surviving writings; Sextus not only tells us what the sceptic’s happiness is like, but also explains why the sceptic’s avoidance of definite beliefs makes him happy, whereas the non-sceptic’s adoption of definite beliefs has the opposite effect.

Two chapters at the center of Sextus’ *Against the Ethicists* bear the titles ‘Whether it is possible to live happily if one postulates things good and bad by nature’ (110-40) and ‘Whether the person who suspends judgement about the nature of good and bad things is in all respects happy’ (141-67). The chapter titles in Sextus are generally thought to be his own, but in any case these titles accurately capture the chapters’ contents. The answer to the first question, unsurprisingly, is ‘no’. The reason is that if, unlike the sceptic, one believes that certain things are by nature good and others by nature bad, that will vastly increase the level of one’s anxiety. One will be obsessed about acquiring, or holding on to, the good things, and about ridding oneself, and keeping oneself rid, of the bad things. The sceptic, on the other hand, who lacks any beliefs of the form ‘X is by nature good/bad’, is free from all such turmoil, and hence, as Sextus says,

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<sup>2</sup> For discussion of this material, and of Pyrrho’s practical attitude more generally, see Bett (2000b), ch.2.

‘it is scepticism’s achievement to procure the happy life’ (140). He immediately goes on to characterize happiness explicitly as tranquillity: ‘That person is happy who conducts himself without disturbance’ (141).

The answer to the second question – and this is perhaps a little more surprising – is also ‘no’. Sextus distinguishes between matters of opinion and matters of necessity. The sceptic lacks all opinions (*doxai*) – and in particular, opinions to the effect that certain things are by nature good or bad – and so, as we just saw, is free from all the associated troubles; as far as these matters are concerned, then, the sceptic is ‘perfectly happy’ (147). But, as he says (143), there are certain things that just happen to us, no matter what we do or do not believe, such as hunger, thirst or pain; and to these things the sceptic is just as vulnerable as everyone else. Since they do cause disturbance to sceptics as well as to others, it follows that on this score the sceptic is *not* ‘perfectly happy’. But even here, Sextus argues, the sceptic does better than others as far as happiness – that is, *ataraxia* – is concerned. For other people, when in pain, have an additional source of trouble besides the pain itself: they also hold the *opinion* that pain is bad by nature. The sceptic, on the other hand, simply feels the pain. Indeed, Sextus even says that the opinion may be worse than the pain itself; for this reason someone watching a surgery (an ancient surgery, that is, without anaesthetic) may actually suffer more than the patient (159)<sup>3</sup>. Thus the sceptic’s state with regard to these matters of necessity, while admittedly not one of *ataraxia*, is one of ‘moderate feeling’ (161), as opposed to violent disturbance; here too, then, the sceptic’s level of happiness is higher than that of the non-sceptic, even if it falls short of full-scale happiness.

Here Sextus is setting himself in opposition (deliberately, I suspect) to both Stoics and Epicureans. The Stoics held that everything except virtue and vice were indifferent;

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<sup>3</sup> Sextus also suggests, in terms that seem borrowed from the Epicureans, that these kinds of inevitable suffering are not as bad as usually supposed. But this seems irrelevant to the question whether the sceptic is better off than others; and the same can be said of other arguments employed in this section (150-61). The one I have just described in the main text is at least pertinent, even if not convincing. For discussion, see Bett (1997), 165-72.

while one's nature inclines one to avoid such things as pain (which usually makes very good sense), their presence or absence does not actually make any difference to one's happiness, because they are not actually bad, and only things that are good or bad affect whether or not one is happy. And the letter Epicurus is said to have written on his death-bed (DL 10.22) suggests that philosophy can in fact mitigate or even prevent the disturbance associated with physical pain; Epicurus says that his tremendous physical sufferings are offset by his memory of past conversations with the addressee Idomeneus. Sextus agrees with the Stoics that pain is not in reality bad, but he does not agree that it makes no difference to one's level of happiness. And he agrees with Epicurus that happiness is a matter of achieving *ataraxia*, but he does not agree that *ataraxia* can be maintained in the face of serious physical suffering. On both counts Sextus can plausibly claim to be more realistic than his opponents<sup>4</sup>. And this realism may be a result of a need felt within the Pyrrhonist tradition to respond to disbelief at the stories of Pyrrho's truly inhuman level of tranquillity. Perhaps the most dramatic one again has to do with ancient surgical techniques; Pyrrho is said not even to have frowned when subjected to surgery and cautery (DL 9.67). But despite adopting a position that is, in important respects, less ambitious than those of either the figurehead of Pyrrhonism or the two major non-sceptical schools, he does insist that the sceptic does better than the non-sceptic, in terms of the achievement of happiness, when it comes to pain and other forms of inevitable suffering – in addition, again, to fully achieving it (whereas his opponents do not achieve it at all) when it comes to matters of opinion.

– II –

The sceptics, then, have quite a lot to say about happiness. They seem to accept the general assumption of ancient Greek philosophy that one measure of a philosophy's

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<sup>4</sup> On the response to Epicurus and on Sextus' greater realism, I am agreeing, respectively, with Nussbaum (1994), 289-90 and Annas (1993), 361.

success is whether living in accordance with it produces happiness. And they take up the challenge of showing that in this respect the sceptic can do at least as well as others (in the case of the Academics), or even (in the case of the Pyrrhonists) that the sceptic can do better. Only in the case of Sextus are we in a position to see specifically and in detail what the arguments were. But the sources make clear that the other sceptics of both traditions had considered positions on the subject.

But now we come to a striking fact. I have spoken of Sextus' treatment of the sceptic's happiness and the non-sceptic's lack of it in *Against the Ethicists*. But in the other work of Sextus that deals with ethics, and with the question of the sceptic's practical stance – namely, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* – the word *eudaimonia* and cognates never appear in connection with scepticism itself<sup>5</sup>. In fact, the word appears only in one short passage in which non-sceptical, and specifically Stoic, views are being discussed (*PH* 3.172-5, 177). The same topics as were dealt with in *Against the Ethicists* in association with the concept of happiness come up again in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Again we have the combination of *ataraxia* in matters of opinion and moderate feeling in matters over which we have no control; again we have the contention that the sceptic is better off in these respects, because belief that things are by nature good or bad brings turmoil; and again we have the example of the onlooker at a surgery fainting because of the belief that what is happening is bad, while the patient maintains his calm (*PH* 3.235-6). *Ataraxia* also comes up in the crucial one-sentence description of scepticism and its effects that occurs near the beginning of the first book; 'The skeptical ability', Sextus says, 'is one that creates oppositions among things that appear and things that are thought in any way whatever, an ability from which we arrive, because of the equal strength in the opposing objects and accounts, first at suspension of judgement, and after that at

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<sup>5</sup> This was noticed in Striker (1990). Sextus' third work, on the specialized sciences (*M* 1-6), uses the word *eudaimonia* a few times in the context of whether these sciences contribute to happiness (*M* 1.270, 271, 294, *M* 6.27, 36). In all but one of these cases the reference to happiness is part of a view attributed to others, and the one exception (*M* 1.294) occurs in the context of a reply to an opponent's view. It is therefore not clear, as far as this work is concerned, whether Sextus is willing to use the notion of *eudaimonia* for his own purposes.

tranquility [*ataraxia*]’ (1.8). And the same combination of *ataraxia* and moderate feeling figures in the opening chapters of the first book as the sceptic’s *telos*, or ultimate aim in life, characterized by Sextus as follows: ‘We say up to now that that the sceptic’s *telos* is *ataraxia* in things relating to opinion and moderate feeling in things that are forced on us’ (1.25). We also find the same claim that belief in things that are good or bad by nature works against the achievement of this *telos*; ‘for the person who has the opinion that there is something by nature fine or bad is continually in turmoil’ (1.27 – the claim is elaborated in 27-30).

Clearly, then, Sextus has not changed his mind about the general character of a sceptic’s life and why it is preferable to a non-sceptic’s life. But he now chooses to express this view without any reference to the notion of *eudaimonia*. So it looks as if he now sees something problematic about it, from a sceptic’s point of view<sup>6</sup>. What might this be?

We have seen that the sceptic avoids beliefs of the form ‘X is by nature good/bad’. And this, of course, is just one aspect of a more general avoidance of belief that defines the sceptical attitude. How far this avoidance extends has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate<sup>7</sup>. But it is clear that the sceptic avoids at least all beliefs having to do with the real nature of things. So one way to refine the question just posed is to ask whether there is anything in the notion of *eudaimonia* that commits one to beliefs about the real nature of things. A number of possibilities may spring to mind. Before we get to these, however, it is worth noting that if there is a problem for the sceptics here, it is a problem that may not apply to the Academic sceptics. As we saw, one way to read the Academics’ ideas about choice, action and the attainment of happiness is as a dialectical exercise, exploiting the consequences of their opponents’ views, not as a

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<sup>6</sup> My wording assumes that *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* is later than the longer work of which *Against the Ethicists* is part. I have argued for this view in detail in Bett (1997). See also the introduction to Bett (2005).

<sup>7</sup> Most of the important essays on this subject are collected in Burnyeat & Frede (1997). See also Brennan (2000).

considered position to which they themselves adhered. And if this is right, then they are of course perfectly entitled to use the notion of *eudaimonia*, regardless of any inconsistency it might have with sceptical principles; so long as their opponents employed the notion of *eudaimonia* – which, of course, they did – the Academics, for this purpose, may quite reasonably do the same. In this case it is only the Pyrrhonists, who do attribute *eudaimonia* to themselves, that are potentially in jeopardy.

What, then, are the presuppositions concerning the real nature of things that are built into the concept of *eudaimonia*? First of all, I have been speaking of the sceptic as claiming to be *better off* than other philosophers. Does this commit the sceptic to an impartial ranking of ways of life, which would presuppose some set of objective values independent of the sceptic's own preferences? I think this would be too hasty. 'Better off' was my shorthand; it does not correspond to anything in Sextus' actual wording. He is certainly interested in *recommending* the sceptic's outlook over those of other philosophers; and his account of the sceptic's *ataraxia* and moderate feeling, as contrasted with the anguish suffered by others because of their beliefs about good and bad, is certainly one that we, as non-sceptics, might describe as a characterization of the sceptics as better off than the rest. But Sextus himself need not conceive of what he is doing in this way. He might describe himself as simply expressing a set of preferences, without attempting to suggest any objective basis for those preferences. He might say 'I *prefer* the sceptics' combination of *ataraxia* and moderate feeling to the anguish and obsession of the non-sceptics. And I expect you would too, if you tried it. But that is not to say that the sceptic's attitude is in some objective sense *better* than that of the non-sceptic. If I believed that, I would certainly be a victim of self-refutation, since beliefs about some things being better, in the nature of things, than others is precisely the source of the non-sceptics' trouble. But to express a preference, and to invite someone else to see whether he or she shares it, is not to commit oneself in any way to an objective or impartial ranking'.

A similar worry might seem to arise when one considers the usual association, in Greek philosophy, between *eudaimonia* and the *telos*. As I said at the outset, *eudaimonia* at its most general seems to consist in one's life going well, whatever that might amount to. Now, the *telos*, or goal of life, is generally understood as being that towards which one's life should be, or naturally is, aiming; hence the near-identity between the concepts of the *telos* and the highest good, that in terms of which all other things are ultimately judged good or not good. On this kind of picture, for one's life to go well is for one to achieve, or be well on the road to achieving, the *telos*. Hence, to specify what *eudaimonia* amounts to, and to specify what the *telos* is, seem to amount to the very same thing. Sextus himself does not make this connection in his surviving works. But this is because the work in which he uses the notion of *eudaimonia* does not contain, in its surviving portion, any discussion of the *telos*. However, the longer work to which *Against the Ethicists* belongs did begin with a general account of scepticism, which is now lost<sup>8</sup>. And that lost general account, which would have paralleled the opening book of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, surely included a discussion of the *telos*, as *Outlines I* does; in fact, Sextus in *Against the Ethicists* appears to refer back to this very discussion (*M* 11.167)<sup>9</sup>. In any case, the fact that the same combination of *ataraxia* and moderate feeling appears in his surviving discussion of the *telos* as appears in the section of *Against the Ethicists* where he talks about the sceptic's happiness suggests that Sextus would have accepted the usual association between *eudaimonia* and the *telos*. But does not all of this presuppose a structure of value that is somehow built into the nature of things?

Again, I do not think the Pyrrhonist is vulnerable to this objection. Scholars have often seen something inconsistent in Sextus' use of the concept of the *telos*<sup>10</sup>; and they would presumably see the same inconsistency in his use of the concept of *eudaimonia*.

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<sup>8</sup> On this see Janáček (1963), Blomqvist (1974).

<sup>9</sup> 'But these topics have been spoken of more precisely in the studies on the sceptical end, and it is not necessary "Once again to relate things clearly said"'. For discussion see Bett (1997), 180.

<sup>10</sup> Two recent papers dealing with this question are Moller (2004) and Grgic (2006).

But, while the *telos* is indeed usually thought of as an end that is somehow built into the nature of things – as being what our natures, and perhaps the nature of the world more generally, suit us to strive for, and to flourish if we attain it – there is no need to read Sextus as signing on to these presuppositions. For him the *telos* may very well be simply what he, as a sceptic, happens to see as an ultimate object of preference; it need not be something that he thinks everyone ought to strive for, or that a correct understanding of human nature will show we will all do best to strive for. That Sextus does have in mind this more limited claim is suggested by his use of the typical Pyrrhonist phrase ‘up to now’ in characterizing the *telos* (*PH* 1.25, quoted above). So far, he is saying, it seems to us that *ataraxia* and moderate feeling are what it makes most sense for us to strive for. But this is not some matter of fixed, immutable fact, anchored in the nature of things; it is simply a fact about our past or present state of mind. And if the *telos*, in Sextus’ hands, does not need to be understood in a way that commits him to an objective order of value, then the usual association between *telos* and *eudaimonia* does not imply that his use of the latter notion would commit him to one either. I spoke of *eudaimonia*, at its most general, as amounting to one’s life going well. But this way of speaking, too, can perhaps be recast in terms of people’s ultimate preferences, without any commitment to an objective ranking of lives.

So far, then, it is not obvious why Sextus would have found the notion of *eudaimonia* problematic. But this is not the end of the story. For one thing, to say that the general understanding of *eudaimonia* needs to be *recast* for Sextus’ use already suggests that it is not naturally suited to a sceptical outlook. To speak of someone’s life *going well* sounds, on the surface at least, as if it is appealing to some kind of objective ranking – at any rate, to something independent of the person’s actual current preferences. Now this point by itself may not carry much weight. But, more importantly, the way in which the term *eudaimonia* is actually used makes it hard to avoid that implication of objectivity. For when Greek philosophers speak of *eudaimonia*, they tend to be interested in the question what, in general, *eudaimonia* consists in; the issue is *what it is for a human*

*being* to be *eudaimôn*, and the answer is one that is supposed to apply to everyone. To say what *eudaimonia* is, then, is not the same as speaking of some individual person's life as going well; it amounts to saying quite generally what is required for a human life to go well. And *this* is not readily understood in terms of anyone's actual current preferences. At the very least, it presupposes some general account of what it takes for the preferences of human beings as such to be satisfied; in other words, it presupposes a certain definite conception of human nature. But very probably, it also presupposes a certain definite ethical position, according to which some states of affairs are better for us than others – a position that, as Sextus puts it, holds some things to be by nature good and others by nature bad.

So although the notion of *eudaimonia* itself is, as Julia Annas has put it, a 'thin and unspecific' one<sup>11</sup>, to use it in the way that Greek philosophers typically use it is to venture into territory where a sceptic, who by definition avoids beliefs about how things are by nature, does not belong. And Sextus, as we have seen, does use it in this typical way in *Against the Ethicists*: he tells us that 'That person is happy who conducts himself without disturbance and ... is in a state of peace and calm' (*M* 11.141). Like Aristotle or the Stoics, he is here issuing a general statement about what it is for a human life to go well. It is a statement that is not uncontroversial; while some, notably the Epicureans, agree that *ataraxia* is the key to happiness, others do not. But even if it was uncontroversial, it is still a statement that requires justification; and it is hard to see how the justification could proceed other than in terms of a theory of human nature and, most probably, a theory of what is genuinely good and bad. The notion of *eudaimonia*, then, has a particular role in Greek ethics that ties it to certain kinds of theorizing. Hence, despite the apparently innocuous character that it seemed to have at the beginning, it is a notion that a sceptic would be ill advised to adopt. So there is, after all, good reason for Sextus to avoid it as he does in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, and there is indeed a threat to sceptical consistency when he uses it in *Against the Ethicists*. One can speak of *ataraxia*

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<sup>11</sup> Annas (1993), 426.

as what the sceptic aims for, and in this context one can even use the word *telos*, ‘end’ – which is normally loaded with similar theoretical baggage – without venturing beyond a strictly sceptical outlook. But if one offers this state aimed for by the sceptic as a specification of *eudaimonia*, one is no longer a true sceptic.

There is another, related reason why a sceptic might be ill advised to adopt the notion of *eudaimonia* for his own use. This can be seen by looking at the attitude expressed towards it by the Cyrenaics, a school in some ways akin to scepticism, but which Sextus (*PH* 1.215) emphasizes is different from scepticism as he understands it (as he does with numerous other philosophers and schools with which scepticism might be confused). The Cyrenaics are said to have denied that *eudaimonia* is the *telos*. According to Diogenes Laertius’s summary of their views, ‘It seems to them that the end is different from happiness. For the end is particular pleasure, while happiness is the whole compounded of particular pleasures, in which both past and future pleasures are counted together. And particular pleasure is worth choosing for its own sake, whereas happiness is worth choosing not for its own sake, but for the sake of the particular pleasures’ (2.87-8, cf. Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 12.544aff.). Along similar lines, one particular sub-group of Cyrenaics, the followers of Anniceris, are said to have denied that there is a *telos* for the whole of life at all, instead claiming that each action has as its own end the pleasure that results from it (Clement, *Strom.* 22.21.130.7-8). What these passages seem to suggest is that *eudaimonia* is something that, by its very nature, applies to the long term, perhaps even to one’s life as a whole. The Cyrenaics prefer not to concentrate their attention on the long term, but on immediate particular pleasures; and for this reason *eudaimonia* is not what they pursue as the *telos*. There is room for disagreement about how radically the Cyrenaics depart from standard assumptions of Greek ethics, including its broadly ‘eudaimonist’ framework; *eudaimonia* is, after all, mentioned in the Diogenes passage as something worth choosing, albeit not directly<sup>12</sup>. But the clear implication of these texts is that a concern for *eudaimonia* – a concern about which the Cyrenaics are expressing at

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<sup>12</sup> For partially opposed positions on this, see O’Keefe (2002), Tsouna-McKirahan (2002).

least some degree of reservation – is a concern for one’s long-term well-being rather than with the immediate present. Indeed, this should not be surprising in light of the point with which we began: that *eudaimonia*, according to the common understanding, amounts to one’s life in general going well. In addition, the notion in the Diogenes passage of a ‘whole compounded of’ particular pleasures may suggest that one’s life must be *structured* (in some unspecified manner) if it is to qualify as going well; the word *sustêma*, which I have translated as ‘whole compounded’, often (though not always) has the connotation of an *ordered* whole – a system, in fact – not just a random collection.

But if the Cyrenaics are wary of the notion of *eudaimonia*, it seems clear that the sceptics should be as well – albeit for somewhat different reasons. The Cyrenaics’ wariness may derive from doubts about our ability to plan for the long term, or perhaps, more radically, from a lack of concern about any time other than the present<sup>13</sup>. For the sceptics, on the other hand, the idea that what humans ought to do is develop a properly structured life over the long term would surely be another piece of theoretical baggage, one from which they would have good reason to distance themselves. Indeed, the Pyrrhonists’ stock phrase ‘up to now’ indicates precisely the opposite of a concern for long-term structure in one’s life; Pyrrhonists act according to how things have struck them so far, without assuming that things will continue in an orderly way as before. (Such an assumption would, after all, amount to a definite position.) And so, to the extent that a concern for the long term and for a structure to one’s life are built into the very concept of *eudaimonia* – as the Cyrenaics’ suspicion of it seems to suggest, and as is consistent with the tenor of much other Greek ethics<sup>14</sup> – the sceptics might very well wish

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<sup>13</sup> For some considerations in favor of this more radical interpretation, see the final section of O’Keefe (2002).

<sup>14</sup> The best-known example of this tendency is of course Aristotle’s phrase ‘in a complete life’ (*NE* 1098a18) appended to his characterization of the human good. Unless Aristotle changes his mind, he cannot literally mean an entire lifetime; for he later admits that someone might be happy at one time and then lose his happiness, and even possibly – though this would be very difficult – regain it later (1101a9-13). But as his explanatory remarks make clear, a ‘complete life’ is at least a substantial period of time.

to avoid it; for them, unlike the Cyrenaics, the problem is not that it incorporates *mistaken* theoretical assumptions, but that it incorporates theoretical assumptions at all.

Let us return to my original question: can an ancient Greek sceptic be *eudaimôn*? The answer, I think, is not entirely straightforward. It is not impossible that a sceptic (not, of course, through any deliberate choice) might happen to live the kind of life that, according to some *other* school's account of *eudaimonia*, would qualify as *eudaimôn*. This is in fact not going to happen in most cases, given that such specifications of *eudaimonia* will usually include a component of definite belief that would be anathema to a sceptic. This is clearly true of the Stoic specification, and presumably of the Aristotelian one. But perhaps the sceptic – assuming he did indeed achieve *ataraxia* – might qualify as *eudaimôn* as conceived by an Epicurean, albeit via a different route from the one laid down by the Epicureans themselves. For the Epicureans aimed at pleasure, and understood this to consist in *ataraxia*; and while the Epicureans, unlike the Pyrrhonists, took the route to *ataraxia* to involve the adoption of certain beliefs about the world, it is not clear that they saw the state of *ataraxia* as itself incorporating any element of belief. What a sceptic would be advised not to do, if I am right, is himself lay claim to the achievement of *eudaimonia*, and include it as a component of the sceptical outlook in a role parallel to the one it occupies in other philosophies; for, as we have seen, the very concept seems to bring with it a number of theoretical presuppositions that one would expect a sceptic to want to avoid. And this, I suspect, is why Sextus decided not to use it in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, even though he had done so in *Against the Ethicists*.

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If a sceptic cannot claim to be *eudaimôn* (even if he might conceivably be so by someone else's lights), can he claim to be *happy*? In other words, do modern notions of happiness have the same kinds of theoretical presuppositions that we have noted in the Greek term *eudaimonia*? Not entirely, at any rate. As I noted at the outset, the English

sentence ‘Are you happy?’ (and I believe this is replicated at least to some extent in other modern languages) can sometimes be asking simply for a sounding of one’s current state of feeling; and there is no problem in a sceptic giving a definite answer – which will sometimes be a positive answer – to this. However, as we saw, ‘Are you happy?’ can also be used to ask whether a person considers his or her life in general to be going well. Here, I think, the sceptic’s ability to answer the question (in the affirmative, or at all) is not so obvious. And here there is a possible lesson for us today<sup>15</sup>.

To return to something suggested earlier, the very idea of someone’s life going well assumes an ability to rank lives on some scale of success. Presumably, on any account, this ranking must be somehow related to actual human needs, interests and preferences. And for the many people today, both in and out of philosophy, who reject any kind of objective values – which are perhaps a kind of modern analogue of the idea from which Sextus distances himself, the idea of things being good or bad by nature – the notion of a person’s life going well will clearly have to be construed in terms of the degree of satisfaction of some such set of needs, interests and preferences (whether these are understood as specific to that individual, common to all humanity, or something in between). But to pin down, in these terms, what it would be for someone’s life to be going well is not easy. We might perhaps want to say that there is no *one* scale of success – that what counts as life going well for me might be different from what counts as life going well for you. But this seems to introduce the danger that what it is for a life to be going well may be reduced simply to the state of well-being experienced (perhaps over some extended stretch of time) by the person in question.

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<sup>15</sup> The reflections that follow are very superficial, and are merely intended to point to some implications that the preceding discussion may have beyond the scholarly field of Greek philosophy. In particular, I take no account of the considerable contemporary literature on the subject of happiness, well-being, etc. For a highly provocative recent contribution in this area, which includes references to many other works, see Benatar (2006), especially 69-88 (‘Three Views About the Quality of Life and Why Life Goes Badly on All of Them’). Other references, and a flourishing series of debates, can be found in the interdisciplinary *Journal of Happiness Studies* (available both in print and online).

Some might say that this is, indeed, all that a life going well can amount to. But many people, including many who are suspicious of any notion of objective values, would be uncomfortable with this. And one reason is that it seems all too clear that there are cases where people are *wrong* about whether their lives are going well. People can report a high level of well-being (and their reports need not be due to self-deception) even though we may judge them to be missing in some crucial component of well-being, such as freedom or dignity. And we may be reluctant to ascribe this simply to a different *perspective* on what is really important in life; such people, we may want to say, do not simply have a different outlook, but a mistaken one, caused perhaps by oppression or a perverse ideology in their societies<sup>16</sup>. But to think that there is a mistake, we surely need to have some view about what *in general* it takes for a life to go well, regardless of people's subjective reports.

Yet, to repeat, getting such a view into focus seems a formidable task. Kant famously held the view that the content of happiness is quite indeterminate. For him, happiness does seem to be relative to individual interests. But given all the uncertainties in the world, he thinks, it is impossible for anyone to tell what will in fact produce happiness even in his or her own case<sup>17</sup>. Nicholas White, in his recent book *A Brief History of Happiness*, goes further. For White, it is more than a matter of mere uncertainty: 'even if we knew all the repercussions' of pursuing various different aims, he says, 'we don't have a determinate way of evaluating the various possible combinations'. White concludes his book by saying that 'we never have or try for a *completely and consistently articulated* concept of happiness', and that 'in an important sense the history

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<sup>16</sup> One can also imagine someone reporting dissatisfaction with his or her life, even though we might see it as containing all that one could hope for. But here we may be less inclined to say that the person's life *is* really going well even though he or she thinks otherwise, because we may see psychic integration, or a positive outlook on one's situation, as itself one component of a life that is going well.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g., Kant (1981), 418-19 (in the original pagination).

of the concept of happiness has been a search for something that's unobtainable'<sup>18</sup>. Unobtainable not because life is a tragedy, but because it is a confused mess; we just do not have a clear enough idea of what we are looking for.

The World Database of Happiness has for decades been collecting information on people's answers to questions purporting to elicit their level of happiness; nations are ranked overall in terms of happiness, as well as in terms of the degree of inequality of the happiness within them, trends are identified over time, and so on<sup>19</sup>. But it seems fair to ask whether there is any single clear commodity being measured. The questions asked are quite varied, but they usually seem to involve one's placing oneself on a scale; the scales generally have to do either with how one feels (at the moment or over time) or with how well one thinks one's life is going. But scales of the first kind seem to invite the question 'compared with what?'. How one thinks one is feeling, as measured on a scale of one to ten, must depend in part on how one thinks a person *ought* to feel, or is *entitled* to feel, or might realistically *aspire* to feel; it is a commonplace observation that some people are 'glass-half-full' and others 'glass-half-empty' types of people, and people in the first category might well place themselves higher on the scale than people in the second category, even if their current states of feeling were actually identical. And scales of the second kind must depend in part on some general conception of what it *means* for a life to be going well. It seems highly unlikely that everyone's views on this issue, either, will be the same. It also seems very possible that different national cultures will affect people's views on both issues – so that the answers elicited to the questions in any one nation may be systematically skewed in one direction or another<sup>20</sup>. In addition, it seems highly unlikely that most people's views about how a person may reasonably expect to feel, or about what it means for a life to go well, are well articulated or precise. Indeed, if

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<sup>18</sup> White (2006); the quoted passages are on pages 169, 173. See also Chekola (2007).

<sup>19</sup> Veenhoven (2010).

<sup>20</sup> Much data, amusingly conveyed, that may seem to support this suspicion can be found in Weiner (2008). Weiner does not, however, seem to notice any of these deeper issues more than intermittently.

White is right, they may be exceedingly fuzzy. All this casts some doubt on *what* the World Database of Happiness is a database of. Yet to give the answers that the Database collects does seem to require that a person have *some* conception of what, in general, a well-lived life is. And so, in answering the questions one is not simply registering states of feeling, but also, implicitly at least, giving voice to values that make some claim to being more than mere expressions of individual preference.

The American political philosopher John Rawls emphasized that the liberal structure of society for which he argued did not impose any one conception of well-being on its citizens, but left them to shape their lives in light of their own conceptions of what a good life would be – provided these conceptions did not interfere with the ability of others to pursue their own conceptions<sup>21</sup>. One problem he faced, and that many contemporary societies face, is that some people’s conceptions of the good life have an absolutist quality that requires their adherents to try to impose them on others. But even for those of whom this is not true – those who are willing to ‘live and let live’ – the very notion of ‘the good life’ has about it an air of aspiring to universal status; and so there is at least a natural tendency to think of the good life, however one conceives it, as a life that people in general would do best to pursue (if only they had the sense to see it), not merely as a life that one individually happens to prefer<sup>22</sup>. And this is so, I suggest, even if

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<sup>21</sup> Rawls’ classic work is, of course, Rawls (1971). But the theme to which I refer is much more prominent in the later Rawls (1993).

<sup>22</sup> As Richard Kraut points out, Rawls himself conceives of the good as relative to the agent’s plans and desires; see Rawls (1971), 27, and Kraut (2006), 192-3. My point is simply that this is not how many people think from the inside about their own conception of the good; for them, it feels like (and feels as if it *ought* to be) something more than a mere set of private plans and desires. Kraut’s main aim is to show that Aristotle does not recognize a category of moral rightness, independent of the question what things are good. His purpose in introducing Rawls is that for Rawls, by contrast, a separate category of rightness is crucial, precisely because Rawls conceives of the good as too subjective in character to serve as the foundation for a theory of justice. Aristotle, unlike, Rawls, has no trouble thinking of justice as a good because he does *not* think of goodness as relative to individual desires or purposes; hence it does not occur to him to seek an altogether different type of value, besides the good, on which to base a theory of justice, or of any other ethically significant characteristic. Now, if I am right about the phenomenology, the division Kraut detects between the modern moral consciousness (which he takes Rawls to be

at a more reflective level one may have doubts about the existence of values that are not reducible to some preferences or other.

What does all this have to do with the sceptics? I asked whether a sceptic could claim to be happy, in the sense of asserting that his life was going well. If, as I have been suggesting, making such an assertion presupposes that one has some general conception, however incompletely specified, of what it is for a life to go well, then the answer must surely be no; for this would be a theoretical commitment, and theoretical commitments are what the sceptic avoids. And if this is correct, then the gap between happiness, in this sense, and *eudaimonia* is not as great as one might have expected. Greek ethical theory offers views about what *eudaimonia* consists in; and in doing so, it specifies what the good human life in general is like. We do not tend to issue general statements of the form ‘happiness is ...’. But in assessing whether someone (perhaps ourselves, perhaps someone else) is happy, we do seem to assume that some such general statements are in principle available. The difference is that, at least if we are not among those absolutists mentioned in the previous paragraph, we are much less likely to be able to produce such statements on demand. This is not just because, as we saw earlier, the notion of *eudaimonia*, at least in some ancient Greek theorists’ hands, seemed to incorporate from the start certain structural constraints. The main point is just that we are a lot vaguer about what adds up to a well-lived life.

Perhaps we should simply give up on the idea that there is any general, non-subjective answer to the question what it is for a life to go well. I have spoken of this idea as something that seems to be implicit in our ways of thinking about such a life. But the idea itself may be a relic of habits of thought that no longer resonate with a contemporary outlook; it is at least tempting to conclude this, given the difficulty in specifying what a

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faithfully reflecting) and the outlook of Aristotle may not be quite as great as he supposes. But the difficulties I have been emphasizing throughout this section – that is, our contemporary difficulties in specifying what well-being consists in – still leave a substantial gulf, one that favors the general tenor of Kraut’s argument. The article is an excellent study of a major divide between Aristotelian and modern ethics; on Aristotle versus Rawls, see especially sections 13-15.

well-lived life would amount to. But here is where the example of Greek scepticism may be relevant to our own concerns. The pure, consistent scepticism of Sextus in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* – the scepticism that does without the concept of *eudaimonia* – offers some sense of what it would be like to give up on that idea. As we saw, what Sextus ends up saying is something like this: ‘We Pyrrhonists like the combination of *ataraxia* and moderate feeling that I have described. At least, we like it so far (who knows whether we may change our minds?). But of course we would not be so rash as to suggest that this is *what it is*, in general, for a human being to live well; that would be committing ourselves to far too much. No, this is just what we happen to prefer. Try it, if you like; we suspect you might like it too. But if not, never mind; it is not as if anything really important turns on the matter’. Is this kind of attitude one that we would be comfortable with? I suspect that for most of us, even if we have suspicions about the status of ethical values, the answer would be no; that degree of detachment seems both unattainable and unwelcome. But if so, then it follows that we cannot easily abandon the general notion of a life that is going well – however disappointed we may be in the project of saying what that amounts to, and however much it may seem to commit us to values of a kind of whose existence many of us are unsure.

Another thing that may be unwelcome about the Pyrrhonist position is that what it recommends is simply a psychological state of contentment. Most of us want something more robust out of life than that, and would consider a life of which that is the highlight to be peculiarly impoverished. Of course, the Pyrrhonists were not the only ones to favor *ataraxia*; the Epicureans did so as well, and in their case the choice had a considerable theoretical basis. But I think it is fair to say that the recommendation of such a psychological state fits particularly well with an outlook that eschews theory; more ambitious recommendations are liable to invite the question ‘why should I bother?’, and the answer will get one into the business of justification, which will tend to lead to definite intellectual commitments. Now, this brings me to a final set of ancient/modern comparisons, and perhaps to another angle on the problem we have just been considering.

If we consider who, in modern times, has offered a definite theory of what happiness consists in, an obvious answer that springs to mind is the British utilitarians. For Bentham and Mill, happiness consists in pleasure, and the way one should act, on any given occasion, is the way that will bring about the most happiness, so understood – not merely for oneself, but for people in general<sup>23</sup>. Sextus would have had at least two reasons for holding this view in suspicion. First, he would not accept pleasure as the goal of life; this is part of his basis for distancing himself from the Cyrenaics (*PH* 1.215). And second, the idea that one ought to maximize the amount of pleasure *in the world*, as opposed to simply cultivating it oneself, is one that would have struck him as in need of justification; in this latter respect, he is not so different from some modern critics of utilitarianism.

One modern thinker who had something to say about both the utilitarians and the Greek sceptics is Friedrich Nietzsche. And in view of these evident differences between them, it is striking that Nietzsche is critical of both groups, and for somewhat similar reasons. Nietzsche sees the pursuit of tranquility as a sign of a decadent, weary human type, and he associates both the utilitarians and the sceptics with this tendency. Nietzsche's relation to the Greek sceptics is in fact much more complicated and ambivalent than this<sup>24</sup>; but his scorn for their ideal of *ataraxia* is at least one significant strand in his reaction to them. Ironically, Nietzsche uses the word 'happiness' (*Glück*) to refer to this and related ideals (although he uses it in other, very different ways as well); and his attitude is well summed up in a remark about the English – but with the English utilitarians particularly in mind: 'Humanity does *not* strive for happiness; only the

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<sup>23</sup> For basic materials from both authors, see Warnock (2003), Ryan (1987).

<sup>24</sup> I have discussed this in Bett (2000a). A major reason for his ambivalence has to do with his attitude towards the notion of objective truth. In so far as the sceptics challenged anyone who claimed to have discovered the objective truth, Nietzsche finds them valuable allies. But in so far as the sceptics do not challenge the very concept of objective truth – on the contrary, in emphasizing the difficulties in pinning down how things really, objectively are, they take for granted that the concept itself makes sense – they do not meet with Nietzsche's approval; for the 'perspectivist' strand in Nietzsche's thought is precisely a challenge to the concept of objectivity itself.

English do' (*Twilight of the Idols*, Epigrams and Arrows, 12)<sup>25</sup>. But in fact it is not only the English whom he accuses of this boring and decadent goal. It is also, as I mentioned, the Greek sceptics, and in fact Greek philosophers in general since Socrates, despite other important differences he is prepared to recognize between them; Socrates, in his view, was responsible for a number of wrong turns in Greek philosophy, and the privileging of happiness (in the sense just referred to) was one of them. The most famous place in which this theme appears is perhaps 'The Problem of Socrates', the first major section of *Twilight of the Idols*. But an unpublished note puts the view into sharper focus; here the Presocratic philosophers are characterized as 'great statesmen', and Nietzsche immediately adds 'With them one does not have the loathsome pretension to happiness, as one does from Socrates on' (KSA 8.102). And that the sceptics are included in this assessment is clear from another unpublished note: 'Ancient philosophy from Socrates on has the stigmata of decadence: moralizing and happiness. High point Pyrrho' (KSA 13.265)<sup>26</sup>.

So Nietzsche would have had little sympathy for my contention a moment ago that it is those who avoid theory who are especially likely to be interested in cultivating an attitude of contentment. With a very broad brush he criticizes both scepticism and numerous theory-laden philosophies, both ancient and modern, for treating precisely this kind of attitude as an ideal. Now it is also true, of course, that Nietzsche himself is deeply suspicious of philosophical theorizing; and this is part of why, in other respects, he finds the Greek sceptics much more congenial<sup>27</sup>. But this in turn, as has been widely recognized, gives a peculiar status to his own ideal of life. For Nietzsche, a life that is going well is one in which risks are taken, strength of some kind is exerted, and

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<sup>25</sup> I use the translation from Nietzsche (1997). I have discussed Nietzsche's various conceptions of happiness, his view of its place in Greek philosophy, and the relation between this and his attitude to the utilitarians, in Bett (2008).

<sup>26</sup> The abbreviation *KSA* refers to Nietzsche (1980); citations are by volume and page number. Translations of these unpublished passages are my own.

<sup>27</sup> See again n. 24.

something admirable is achieved – quite the opposite of the sceptics’ *ataraxia*. He is not trying to supply any *single* formula for a well-lived life – artists, politicians or explorers, of various different types, might all succeed equally well in his eyes – but he is not at all averse to ranking human beings, and these broad constraints are among the means he uses to do so. And yet, given his critiques of philosophical theory, he is not so far from the sceptics when the question of justification arises; he can and does elaborate on his particular vision, but in the end, like the sceptics, he is quite willing to admit that this is *his vision*, not an account built upon some more neutral foundation<sup>28</sup>. Nietzsche’s vision, unlike that of the sceptics, is not likely to strike us as impoverished – whether or not we find it ultimately congenial. But precisely because it is so much fuller and more vibrant than theirs, it perhaps puts into even starker focus the same question posed by theirs: can visions that are avowedly *just visions* of their proponents address the kinds of concerns that seem to surround the issue of what it is for a life to go well? Many of us may have the sense that this is not enough, for reasons that I have tried to convey. Now that, of course, is only to open a discussion, not to close it. But I hope I have at least made plausible the idea that reflection on the ancient Greek sceptics would make a worthwhile contribution to that discussion.

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<sup>28</sup> See especially *Beyond Good and Evil* 22, ‘Supposing that this also [i.e. a set of views that he has just put forward] is only interpretation – and you will be eager enough to make this objection? – well, so much the better’. I use the translation from Nietzsche (1966).

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