



Criterion of Truth and Common Beliefs: Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians* 1 (*M* 7)

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Abstract

“Do we need a criterion of truth to make ordinary claims like ‘the water in the bath is tepid’? Yes. Then the Pyrrhonians cannot consistently hold such claims, and inactivity threatens their skeptical philosophical undertaking.” When introducing the discussion of the criterion in *M* 7, Sextus presents certain beliefs about the existence and priority of the criterion of truth as commonly held – beliefs that could make the above line of reasoning seem natural and inescapable. Yet this opening serves to set up Sextus’ subsequent strategy, which not only rejects the Dogmatists’ arguments about the criterion of truth but also undermines a common way of thinking and speaking about it – a way based on an analogy with measuring instruments that had shaped the very pre-conception of the criterion. By targeting this preconception and this analogy, Sextus’ strategy weakens the persuasive force of the inactivity argument against the Skeptics and opens up a different perspective on ordinary truth claims and the investigation into the criterion of truth.

Keywords

Criterion of truth – Pyrrhonian skepticism – inactivity (apraxia) argument – common beliefs

1 Introduction

The first of Sextus' two books *Against the Logicians* is entirely devoted to the criterion of truth.¹ The concept of the criterion is central to what has been described as 'the birth of an epistemology worthy of the name' (Brunschwig 1999, 230), which took place at the beginning of the Hellenistic period. By devoting his first book against logic to the criterion, Sextus follows the later Stoics' dominant view that the account of the criterion of truth was the first integral and indispensable part of logic. For the Stoics, logic is a systematic science through which the wise man's edifice of knowledge is gradually built up: first, it is securely founded on primary infallible assents to elementary judgements, and then it is further developed by conclusions correctly deduced from them. Since the primary foundational judgements are formed through the criterion of truth and are regarded as immediate truths, their evident character is considered indisputable, and there is no need and no room for arguments for or against them; no room, therefore, for the 'serpent' of skepticism to enter the edifice of knowledge.²

However, it was over the very concept of the criterion that the Academic Skeptics developed their most famous dialectical arguments against the dogmatic philosophers of their time. In response, the Dogmatists formulated the inactivity argument, their most effective counterargument against the Academic Skeptics: any simple truth claim, such as 'It is day,' is dependent on the criterion of truth; denying the criterion of truth leads to sweeping away all belief, and this further results in inactivity. Building upon this long-standing debate, the Pyrrhonians developed their own strategy on the matter.

For Sextus, the discussion of the criterion was the crucial opening of the Pyrrhonian comprehensive attack on 'the parts of the so-called philosophy'.³

1 Sextus covers the same topic, more concisely, in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (= *PH*) 2.14–79. Despite the apparent similarities between this section and the first book of *Against the Logicians* (= *M*), there are also crucial differences. Here I will limit my attention to *M* 7. For systematic comparisons between the two, see Long 1978 and Bett 2005, xxiv–xxx.

2 One interpretation of what drove Hellenistic epistemology to introduce the concept of the criterion of truth emphasizes the role of skepticism. Jacques Brunschwig vividly sketches an image of this interpretation when he presents what drove philosophy out of the 'happy paradise of epistemological innocence', after Aristotle's death, as 'the serpent of Pyrrhonism' (1999, 229). Gisela Striker has a similar view (1990, 143). Michael Frede seems to see a different aspect: he takes the introduction of criterion as a reaction to speculative theorizing, i.e., to dogmatism (1999, 264–265).

3 *PH* 1 6: *pros hekaston meros tēs kaloumenēs philosophias antilegomen*. For an interpretation of the phrase *tēs kaloumenēs philosophias* and, consequently, of the target of the Pyrrhonian attack. cf. Tigani 2017, 66–67.

Following his opponents' foundational scheme, in *M* 7 he undertakes an attack on the deep foundations of dogmatic philosophy. He reconstructs the entire philosophical tradition in terms of dogmatic arguments for and against the existence of the criterion (*M* 7.46–262) and presents the Pyrrhonian arguments against it (*M* 7.263–439). Nevertheless, Sextus' aim is not simply 'to subject to scrutiny the views of the dogmatists' and 'to bring us to a position of suspension of judgement [...] by juxtaposing the positive arguments of the dogmatists with the critical arguments supplied by himself' (Bett 2005, xvii–xviii). I will argue that his strategy goes deeper: it undermines the dogmatic philosophers' way of thinking and speaking about the criterion, which is what gave this concept the appearance of a naturally formed and commonly shared preconception. Since the inactivity argument relies on this preconception and on the alleged common beliefs associated with it, Sextus' strategy in *M* 7 also undermines the convincing power of the inactivity argument against the Skeptics.

Although the concept of the criterion originated as a technical philosophical notion first formulated and introduced in the Hellenistic era (see Striker 1996), the philosophers who espoused this concept spoke and argued about it as if it were a commonly held preconception. Such a way of speaking about the criterion can be detected in Sextus' *M* 7, initially in a preamble on the significance of the matter (*M* 7.27–28) and in the following introductory chapter on the different senses of the criterion (*M* 7.29–37). There, Sextus spotlights the analogy between the philosophers' criterion and the instruments for measuring in practical matters, and analyzes the peculiar universal term 'criterion' under which the philosophers' criterion, measuring instruments, and in general anything we appeal to when claiming to know the truth in certain practical matters fall. Two interconnected beliefs, entailed by the measuring analogy and the universal term 'criterion', are also presented there as commonly held: the belief that the criterion the philosophers argue about exists to be found and the belief that this criterion has an authoritative priority over whatever we trust to discern truth in practical matters.

Even modern scholars take such a way of thinking about the criterion as natural, and as presenting Pyrrhonians with reasonable and presumably inescapable difficulties. For instance, according to Jonathan Barnes, simple judgements such as 'the water in the bath is tepid' are very problematic, if not impossible, for a Pyrrhonian. Barnes claims that a Pyrrhonian 'will only believe that the water is tepid if he judges it to be so; and he can only judge it to be so if he possesses a criterion of truth by which to judge it' (1982, 11). He, therefore, concludes that 'the possession of ordinary beliefs presupposes the possession of at least one *dogma* – the *dogma* that there is a criterion of truth' (1982, 12).

This way of thinking about the criterion threatens the Pyrrhonians, by leading to seemingly impossible outcomes: without a criterion of truth, they are unable to discern the truth about even the most ordinary and basic matters. Simply put, after attacking the criterion, a Pyrrhonian cannot remain consistent with his arguments and still, for example, say that the water in the bath is tepid, or use a straight edge to claim that the wall in front of him is straight and not crooked. But is this way of thinking natural and inescapable for the Pyrrhonians, as Barnes' argument implies, or is it based on dogmatic philosophical theories and has no bearing on the Skeptics, as Tad Brennan argues against Barnes' argument (1994, 154)? I believe neither of these alternatives is correct. Against both, I will argue that Sextus, at the beginning of his investigation into the criterion in *M* 7, presents this way of thinking as natural and as related to beliefs about the existence and priority of the criterion of truth that were commonly held rather than Dogmatic, only to subsequently develop a strategy that counterbalances the convincing power of what initially appeared as natural and common.

Sextus' strategy against the criterion, while undermining the alleged common preconception of the criterion opens up the possibility of understanding ordinary truth claims and everyday practices for discerning truth without presupposing the existence of a criterion of truth like the one philosophers argue about. Therefore, understanding this strategy can play an important role in answering the question of whether it is possible or not for the Skeptics to make any truth claims and have any common beliefs, a core question in the famous controversy among modern scholars over Pyrrhonism.⁴

2 The philosophers' criterion and measuring instruments

When reading the preamble to Sextus' discussion of the criterion, the first thing that strikes us is that Sextus presents the existence of the criterion of truth, not as a philosophical or dogmatic assumption but as something commonly trusted, as a common belief (*koinē pistis*). Furthermore, as Sextus remarks, the subsequent investigation into the criterion of truth is expected to provide grounds either for the Dogmatists' choice to trust this common belief or for the Skeptics' choice to question it, with both rival sides adjudicated and refuted accordingly. Let us read the text, *M* 7.27:

⁴ See Burnyeat and Frede 1999, Barnes 1982, Brennan 1994, Schwab 2013, Tigani 2023, to give just a few selective references on the subject.

The investigation of the criterion is universally contentious, not only because the human being is by nature a truth-loving animal, but also because it [i.e., this investigation] pronounces judgement upon the highest-level schools of philosophy regarding the most important matters. For either the dogmatists' big solemn boast will need to be completely done away with, if no standard (*kanōn*) is found for the true reality of things, or, on the contrary, the skeptics will need to be refuted as rash and as making an insolent attack upon common belief (*koinē pistis*), if something comes to light which is capable of leading our way to the apprehension of the truth. For it will be too bad if we expend extreme effort in searching for the external criteria, such as rulers (*kanones*) and compasses, weights and balances, while we leave aside the one that is in us (*en hemin*), and that is thought to be able to test those very externals (*toutōn autōn dokimastikon einai dokoun*).

SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *M* 7.27; trans. based on Bett (2005) and Bury (1935)]

Sextus here speaks about the subsequent investigation into the criterion of truth as having a wider scope than solely that of an attack against the Dogmatic theories. This is suggested by Sextus' reference to the common belief that 'the human being is by nature a truth-loving animal', which underlines the significance of the matter for all human beings. At the same time, Sextus sets up the battle scene between the Dogmatists and the Skeptics. Two interrelated beliefs about the criterion of truth, which are presented as being generally accepted, form the context of the battle.

The first common belief is that the criterion disputed by the philosophers exists and deserves our best efforts to be found. As Sextus remarks, the investigation into the criterion places the Skeptics in danger of being refuted as rash and as making an insolent attack upon the common trust in such a criterion, if such a criterion comes to light. Thus, the skeptical arguments against the criterion of truth are presented as being in opposition not only to the Dogmatists' theories about the criterion of truth but primarily to the common belief that such a criterion is there to be found.

The second common belief is that the criterion of truth has a certain priority and authority over the measuring instruments we use in ordinary practices. Sextus contrasts external criteria, such as rulers (*kanones*), compasses, weights and balances, with the criterion in us, which is a standard (*kanōn* again) 'for the true reality of things.' This criterion in us is the subject of dispute between Dogmatists and Skeptics. The point of the contrast is the remark that it would be absurd and shocking not to devote our best efforts to the search for the criterion in us, since the criterion in us is believed (*dokoun*) to be able to test

the external criteria (*toutōn autōn dokimastikon einai*). The adjective *dokimastikos*, formed with the ending *-ikos* which denotes ability, is derived from the verb *dokimazō*. *Dokimazō* and the noun *dokimasia* were used for political procedures of testing the right and the ability of someone to do something. Sextus, some paragraphs later, gives the following explanation about the verb *dokimazō*: it is ‘the kind of thing that happens in assemblies, when the people examine each of those who are in line to be office-holders or judges, to see if he is worthy of being entrusted with the office or the judgeship’ (*M* 7.182). In this case, those selected to become, for example, judges, are not judges unless approved by the assembly. Similarly, the criterion of truth in us, as Sextus says, was believed to be *dokimastikon*, i.e., to have the ability to test the external criteria, in order to see if they are worthy of being entrusted. Hence, the criterion in us is granted *authoritative priority* over external criteria, such as measuring instruments. A criterion in us, ‘a non-metrical criterion,’ as A. A. Long puts it, was required ‘for proving that the standard metre is a metre’ (1978, 38).

Sextus does not say much about how these two beliefs were formed and how they became common. However, in the concluding section of his book (*M* 7.443), he speaks about a common preconception (*koinē prolēpsis*) of the criterion as the basis of the common trust in the existence of the criterion of truth.⁵ How was this common trust, as well as the common preconception of criterion, created? Sextus is not interested in the history of the concept, but there are some relevant points to be made here.

The analogy between the criterion of truth and *kanōn*, i.e., the carpenters’ or builders’ straight edge or ruler, an analogy which Sextus preserves when he describes criterion of truth as ‘*kanōn* for the true reality of things’ and which historically played an essential part in philosophers’ framing of the concept of the criterion (see Striker 1996, 32), seems to have served a certain philosophical agenda. Connecting criterion with measuring instruments was not part of common usage. Before the philosophers’ framing of the concept, *kritērion* denoted the courthouse and the terms *kritēs* and *krisis* were primarily connected either with trial procedures and with the verdict of the jury or with the contentious decisions of the judges in the poetic contests. Therefore, in common language judging was primarily a matter of difficult and contentious decisions.⁶ In formulating the philosophical concept of criterion, philosophers

5 For Sextus’ general response to the Epicurean criticism that preconceptions commit the Sceptics who use them to the reality of what these conceptions conceive of, see Tigani 2016, 197–200; Fine 2014, 345–368; Vogt 2012, 149–152; Fine 2011; Corti 2009, 199–206.

6 Cf. for example Aristotle’s remark: ‘the only sort of person who can strictly be called a judge (*kritēs*) is the man who decides the issue in some matter of public controversy; for the issue

ignored the connection found in common language between *kritēion*/*krisis* and these processes of judgement,⁷ and they focused instead on the analogy with measuring instruments.⁸ In utilizing these instruments, in contrast to what happens in the law court, we become absolutely certain about the truth of our judgements without the need of any argument, let alone of any arguments on both sides of the matter. Thus, philosophers claimed that the criterion of truth, being similar to these instruments, could in a similar way provide us with certain pieces of knowledge which are not the product of arguments and are unassailable by arguments.

Moreover, the similarity between the criterion of truth and the measuring instruments brought about the idea that the criterion of truth is a criterion in us, while the measuring instruments are criteria external to us. So, Sextus uses the same term, the term 'criterion', when he calls 'external criteria' the measuring instruments and 'criterion in us' the standard for the true reality of things that the philosophers argue about. It seems that after the philosophers introduced the concept of the criterion, the use of the term shifted to instruments with which we may claim to know, for example, that this amount of cereals is more or less than that or that this wall is straight or crooked. Extending the usage of the term 'criterion' to the measuring instruments, brought to the philosophical concept of criterion the appearance and the familiarity of a concept we are naturally led to acquire and trust. At the same time the evident reference of these 'external criteria' to tangible credible instruments 'breathed referential life'⁹ into the concept. Furthermore, based on these 'external criteria' several dialectical arguments, more or less compelling, produced a common trust in the existence of the philosophers' criterion of truth: if there is the ruler, the straight edge and the scale, and the criterion of truth is similar to them,

concerns the facts under dispute or subject to deliberation.' *Rhetoric* 1391b 16–19, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, in Barnes 1984.

7 As far as I know, only Ptolemy's *On the Criterion*, the work of 'a practicing scientist, not a philosopher' (Long 1988, 178), presents the analogy with the law-court in detail and takes it to be 'the closest analogue'. See Long 1988 and Schiefky 2014. For the text see Huby and Neal 1989, 179–230.

8 Striker (1996, 24) remarks that the usages of the word 'criterion' for the courthouse and for the criterion of philosophy 'appear to be independent of one another'. However, the explanation that she proposes, according to which the former was taken over from the Doric dialect while the second was related to the use of the Attic word *kritēs*, is not sufficient, not even in linguistic terms: first, because the use of the word 'criterion' for the courthouse, in spite of its Doric origin, was part of the Attic dialect in the 4th c. BC (cf. for example Plato's usage in *Lg.* 767b); and second, because the Attic word *kritēs* was used not only for the evaluators or arbiters in poetic contests, but also for the judges in the law court.

9 I borrow the phrase from Richard Fumerton (2008, 41), who uses it in a different context.

then it does exist; or, if the criterion in us is necessarily presupposed in the use of the external criteria, then again it does exist.¹⁰ Subsuming the philosophers' criterion and common instruments under the same universal concept was not merely 'a natural extension' of the use of the former to name the latter, as Striker suggests (1996, 72). Instead, it was an ingenious move on the philosophers' part, a step which appeared natural and created the semblance of a common preconception, thereby establishing the common trust in the existence of a criterion of truth and affirming the authoritative priority of this criterion over anything else we might use to discern the truth in practical matters.

Therefore, although 'criterion' was a concept first formed by philosophers, its philosophical origin was forgotten. Once the new notion of the criterion blended into language and became part of the common conceptual framework, a common trust in it was established and certain beliefs also became part of the complex network of commonly accepted beliefs. For example, the belief that just as the external criteria, i.e., measuring instruments, can provide uncontroversial truths in practical matters, the criterion in us can also provide uncontroversial truths on which we can found solid knowledge. Additionally, the further optimistic belief that our search for this internal criterion will be as successful and beneficial as the search for external criteria.

3 The Dogmatists' criterion and the criteria of everyday life

In a section (29–37) previously announced at the end of the preamble as an exploration of 'the multiple ways in which the criterion is spoken of,'¹¹ Sextus delineates a map of the various senses of 'criterion' and the different criteria corresponding to each of them. First, he places at the borders of this map the criterion of action – a criterion the Pyrrhonians themselves require. Then, he displays the dominant position of the Dogmatists' criterion within this map, indicating its authority over the criteria he refers to as 'the everyday criteria.' Accordingly, he specifies his subject matter for the subsequent investigation and presents a third distinction that he follows in organizing his arguments

10 That the analogy with measuring instruments brought about a common trust in the existence of the criterion is also indicated in one of Galen's arguments for the existence of natural criteria. The analogy here is the basis for a contrast between human-made measuring instruments and natural instruments or criteria, such as the senses. The argument maintains that because these measuring instruments are actually efficient, for example the ruler distinguishes lengths and the scales weights, and because they could not exist without the existence of natural criteria, natural criteria exist (Galen, *Opt. Doct.* I.48–49). See Hankinson 1998.

11 *M* 7 28: [...] *exēgētikōs hupodeiknūntes, posachōs legetai to kritērion* [...].

against the Dogmatists' criterion. Interpreting this section and understanding the complex relationships among these different senses of criteria present several difficulties. Let us begin by outlining the first two distinctions.

Initially (*M* 7.29), Sextus distinguishes the criterion 'to which we attend when we do some things and not others' from the criterion 'to which we attend when we say that some things are real (*huparchein*) and others are not real (*mē huparchein*), and that these things are true, and those things are false'. He leaves aside the former, i.e., the practical criterion, which, –as he remarks– for the Pyrrhonians is 'the apparent' (*to phainomenon*: *M* 7.30), and then, in the following paragraphs (*M* 7.31–33), he distinguishes three ways that the latter – i.e., the 'criterion of reality' (31: *to tēs huparkseōs*) – is spoken of, commonly, specially and most specially (*koinōs te kai idiōs kai idiaitata*):

Commonly (*koinōs*), it is every measure of apprehension, and in this sense even the natural criteria, such as sight, hearing and taste, were thought worthy of the appellation. Specially (*idiōs*), it is every technical measure of apprehension – as one would call a cubit and a pair of scales and a ruler and a compass criteria, in so far as they are technical, but not by any means sight and hearing and in general the remaining common sense-organs, which are constituted naturally. Most specially (*idiaitata*) it is every measure of apprehension of an unclear object, in terms of which the everyday criteria (*ta biōtika*) are no longer called criteria; it is only the logical ones (*ta logika*) that are so called – namely, those that the Dogmatists bring in for the discovery of the truth.

SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *M* 7.31–33

Immediately after the first distinction between the practical criterion and the criterion of reality, Sextus specifies the criterion he is currently inquiring into as the latter (*M* 7.31: *peri hou ta nun skeptometha*). Two paragraphs later, after the presentation of the distinction 'commonly, specially and most specially' in the senses of the criterion of reality, and after the remark that according to the most special sense the everyday criteria (*ta biōtika*) are no longer called 'criteria,' he specifies again the subject matter of his investigation as follows:

since the criterion is spoken of in many ways, the task before us is again to inquire primarily into the logical one (*peri tou logikou*) that the philosophers talk so much about, but consequentially (*kat' epakolouthēma de*) into each of the criteria of everyday life as well (*peri hekastou tōn kata ton bion*).

SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *M* 7.34

Now, several issues arise: questions about the nature and origin of each of these distinctions, and about their role in specifying the subject matter of the subsequent discussion; the problem of determining the reference and location of the criteria related to everyday life (*ta biōtika* and the criteria *kata ton bion* as they are mentioned in this context) within the overall map of distinctions, and their relationship to the Dogmatists' 'logical' criterion; and finally, the implications of the skeptical strategy against the Dogmatists' criteria both for the criteria related to everyday life and for the concept of criterion in general.

The first thing to notice is that the plain distinction between the 'criterion in us' and the 'external criteria,' which was used earlier in presenting common beliefs about the criterion of truth is not mentioned here. Here, Sextus offers an account of elaborate philosophical distinctions that go beyond those considered part of common beliefs about the criterion. However, as we shall see, these distinctions, are not derived from any particular philosophical school and its specific theory about the criterion. Rather, they are based on the pre-conception of the criterion, and they stand on common ground between the rival philosophical schools.

Let us focus on the first distinction between the criterion of reality and the practical criterion. Brunschwig, remarks that this distinction 'is as old as Epicurus' (1988, 159–161). Sextus' description of the Pyrrhonian practical criterion as a criterion of choice and avoidance (*haireseōs hama kai phugēs*: M 7.30) can actually be found as the description of one of the criteria of truth that our sources ascribe to Epicurus (Diogenes Laertius 10.34). However, for Epicurus, the criterion of choice and avoidance is clearly a criterion of truth; it is not a practical criterion that stands in contrast to the criterion of truth. Therefore, it is more plausible that the 'sharp distinction' between the two originated not with Epicurus¹² but with the actual philosophical debate between the Academics and the Dogmatists. The Academics were those who first resorted to this criterion pressed by the necessity to answer their opponents' counterattack, according to which the lack of a criterion of truth renders rational and happy life, or even simply life, impossible. This is how Sextus himself presents the necessity that led Arcesilaus and Carneades to introduce a criterion

12 Long and Sedley ascribe to 'later Scepticism' the 'sharp distinction' between criteria of truth' and 'criteria of action', and they remark that 'it is doubtful whether Epicurus separated the two' (vol. 1, 1987, 90). Elizabeth Asmis also remarks that there is no implication that the affections (*pathē*) by which choice and avoidance are judged, are not for Epicurus a criterion of truth (1999, 275). Although affections can work as a practical criterion and guide us to do this and avoid that, primarily they are a criterion of truth; what makes them 'practical' is just the direct connection between some of the truths we acquire through them and the actions we choose to do or not to do because of these truths.

of action (M 7.158 and 166).¹³ Sextus, uses almost the same wording as that he uses in describing the Pyrrhonian criterion of action in our passage (M 7. 30), when he is ascribing to Arcesilaus the statement that ‘he will regulate his choices and avoidances (*tas haireseis kai phugas*) and generally his actions (*praxeis*) by the reasonable’ (M 7. 158). Furthermore, in both passages, M 7. 30 and 158, apart from the reference to ‘choice and avoidance’ and ‘actions,’ Sextus makes clear that he speaks about a criterion for ‘everyday life’ (*bios*).¹⁴ Thus, it seems to me reasonable that, when he specifies few paragraphs later the subject matter of his investigation (M 7. 34) as ‘primarily’ the logical criterion, but ‘consequently’ each of the criteria *kata ton bion*, he refers to the practical criterion of this first distinction and to certain practical criteria, apart from the Pyrrhonian, like that of Arcesilaus and Carneades which fall under this sense. Sextus actually discusses Arcesilaus’ and Carneades’ practical criteria in M 7 (150–187), underlining that Arcesilaus primarily (*proēgoumenōs*) did not define any criterion (150) but he gave one because ‘it was necessary to investigate the contact of life’ (*edei kai peri tēs tou biou diexagōgēs zētein*); and Carneades was similarly, according to Sextus, ‘compelled’ (*dunamei epanankazetai*) to give a criterion for the conduct of life.

To uphold this interpretation,¹⁵ we need to understand how the practical criterion, which was clearly set aside when Sextus moved on to the next distinction in the senses of the criterion of reality, reappears in connection to the most specific sense of the criterion of reality, namely, the logical criterion. If the first distinction between the practical criterion and the criterion of reality were a distinction of a genus into two properly exclusive kinds, leaving the first behind to focus on the second would render such a reappearance implausible. But the distinction between the practical criterion and the criterion of reality is not a typical distinction of a genus into two exclusive kinds; on the contrary, it is a distinction that bears the mark of the debate in which it originated: philosophers were primarily searching for a criterion of truth to base their lives on the secure ground of truth and knowledge; lacking a criterion of truth, they were faced with the necessity of a criterion of action; however, as soon as a criterion of truth might be found, this criterion of action would lose its justification and criterial status.

Therefore, the antithesis ‘primarily–consequently’ (*proēgoumenōs – kat’ epakolouthēma*) used by Sextus in specifying the subject matter of the following investigation (in paragraph 34) does not denote an order of two sections,

13 See the Appendix of Bett 1989.

14 M 7 30: *kata ton bion*; M 7 158: *peri tēs tou biou diexagōgēs*

15 Against Brunschwig 1988 and Brennan 1994. See next footnote.

one on the criterion of reality, which comes first, and one on the practical criteria, which follows.¹⁶ Instead, it emphasizes the hierarchical and dependent nature of these investigations. The priority of the investigation into the logical criterion implies that it has the authority to come first, while the consequentiality of the investigation into the practical criterion means that this criterion enters the scene, or perhaps leaves the scene, only as a consequence of the investigation into the former.

I will argue that similarly the next distinction in the senses of the criterion of reality, i.e., the distinction ‘commonly, specially and most specially,’ is not a typical distinction of a genus into three exclusive kinds but represents a hierarchy of senses organized under the authority of the Dogmatists’ logical criterion. But first we need some historical and philological details.

The same three-part distinction in the senses of the criterion is found in a very brief formulation in the pseudo-Galenic *De historia philosophica*.¹⁷ We also find the distinction ‘commonly, specially and most specially’ applied to other concepts, as for example to the concept of *hairesis*, in the same pseudo-Galenic text (7.3), and to the concept of *diaphora*, in Porphyry’s *Introduction* (3.7–27, see Barnes 2003, 154–164).¹⁸ Finding the same distinction in the senses of the criterion in the *De historia philosophica* makes clear that the distinction was not Sextus’ invention. Furthermore, the fact that the distinction was also used to present different senses of other concepts in handbooks intended to introduce non-philosophers to the study of philosophy,¹⁹ suggests that it was not

16 Brennan (1994, 157) identifies the criteria *kata ton bion* in paragraph 34 with the *biōtika* criteria that Sextus mentions in the context of his distinction in the senses of the ‘criterion of reality.’ Following Brunschwig (see 1988, 164 and n. 29), he takes them to correspond to the first two parts of this three-part distinction, i.e. to the natural criteria, such as sight, hearing and taste, and to every technical measure of apprehension, as the measuring instruments. Since Sextus does not discuss these *biōtika* criteria anywhere in *M* 7, Brennan remarks that Sextus in *M* 7 34 is ‘less careful’ than he should be and thus he ‘gives the false impression that he plans to examine the criteria of action and life.’ According to the interpretation I propose, we do not need to suppose that Sextus, in such a crucial point where he is identifying the subject matter and the content of his book, is not careful enough.

17 12.1: *legetai de to kritērion trichōs, koinōs, idiōs, idiaitata*.

18 According to some contemporary scholars this and other parallels to Sextus’ passages are due to a common source. For *De historia philosophica*, see Mansfeld and Runia 1996, 141–156.

19 In the case of *De historia philosophica* the writer’s purpose seems to be that of introducing those fond of learning, i.e., non-philosophers, to the study of philosophy (Mansfeld and Runia 1996, 141). Jonathan Barnes attributes a similar purpose to Porphyry’s *Introduction* (2006, xv).

considered to be part of any particular school's doctrine on the criterion.²⁰ It rather seems to have been a widely accepted type of scholarly distinction used by teachers and doxographers in handbooks to help readers cross the distance between certain common terms with which they were familiar and the technical usages of these same terms in philosophical contexts. This becomes clear in the explanations given for the senses 'commonly, specially and most specially' in the case of 'approval' (*hairesis*) in the pseudo-Galenic text. There, the common sense of 'approval' is taken to be ordinary approval of something in ordinary life, the special sense is approval in the arts, and the most special sense is approval in philosophy.²¹

In our distinction in Sextus, the criterion in its most special sense corresponds, as in the distinction in the case of 'approval', to the criterion in philosophy. Sextus remarks that the 'criterion most specially' is 'every measure of apprehension of an unclear object', in terms of which the criteria 'that the Dogmatists bring in for the discovery of the truth' are called 'criteria'.²² But the criterion 'commonly' and the criterion 'specially' are distinguished on the basis that the former is naturally constituted while the latter is technical, and not by reference to whether they are used in life or in the arts. However, the natural constitution of the former makes them common and ready to be used by everyone, whereas the technical constitution of the latter presupposes some technical knowledge.

Contemporary scholars have discussed the possibility of correcting our text, by inserting the adjective *technikon* in the description of the criterion 'most specially',²³ an adjective that is also found in the main manuscripts of the corresponding passage in *PH* 2.15, although it is absent in the manuscripts of *M*. In this way we arrive at a distinction that moves from the broader sense to the narrower. It seems that within the criterion of reality, which is generally defined as 'every measure of apprehension', a narrower kind is defined as 'every measure of apprehension *technikon*' and then withing this an even narrower one defined as 'every measure of apprehension *technikon* of an unclear

20 Jonathan Barnes (2003, 316) argues convincingly against the view that the distinction *koinōs-idiōs-idiaitata* was a Stoic distinction, and he maintains that 'there is nothing characteristically Stoic' there.

21 *Tēn hairesin hupolambanousi tines eirēsthai trichōs, koinōs kai idiōs kai idiaitata. Koinōs men tēn tini pragmati tōn kata ton bion sunkatathesin, idiōs de tēn en technē, idiaitata de tēn en tē philosophia.* (7.3).

22 For the problem of Sextus referring to the criterion of truth both as a criterion for the evident (*M* 7.25) and here as a criterion for the non-evident, see Striker 1996, 72, Brunschwig 1988, 166–175, Vlasits 2020, section 4.1.

23 See Heintz 1932, 83–84.

object'. We may accept this correction, understanding *technikon* not as denoting something artificial or human-made, but as denoting something that presupposes the knowledge and skills of a *technē* (pace Brunschwig, 165). This is implied by the characterization *logikon/a* for the criterion 'most specially' in our text. This criterion is called '*logikon*' because it is the logical part of philosophy (*ho logikos topos*), as Sextus notes several paragraphs earlier, that contains the study of the criteria (*M* 7 24). Determining what the criterion is and using it effectively requires specialized technical work within the logical part of philosophy and in general requires the philosopher's expertise (*technē*). For example, the Stoics' criterion, i.e., the cognitive impression, which according to their doctrine is available to all human beings, could be considered technical in this sense; after all, most human beings are fools and only the Stoic wise man can use it as a criterion of reality, i.e., infallibly to arrive at true knowledge.

Nevertheless, even if we accept the term *technikon* in our text, we still do not obtain a typical division of a genus into narrower kinds. Moving on to the next step of the division we do not have a new name to denote a new, narrower kind, as when we move for example from animal to mammal and then to sheep. Instead, we move to more stringent conditions for using the same term, the term 'criterion', and for determining what a criterion might be, with these conditions being set each time by different more technical contexts.

We can imagine how this may happen. In certain contexts, we may say 'It is true, I have seen it with my own eyes,' and such a truth claim may be accepted and go undisputed. However, there are cases in which such a truth claim, based merely on what our eyes can clearly see, is not accepted. For example, as a builder, I need to use the straight edge, and I cannot just trust my eyes to determine whether the wall I am building is straight. My eyes may be mistaken, but the instrument which has been constructed on the basis of technical knowledge can tell whether what I think I see is true or not. This does not mean that I do not use my eyes at all; it just means that I do not trust them as the criterion of truth anymore. To be sure that the house I am building will not collapse, I need to use a precise technical instrument. Similarly, as a philosopher, I cannot simply trust my senses or the measuring instruments. Their claims to truth need to be examined by an elaborate and infallible criterion. This criterion guarantees beyond doubt the truth of the basic and simple things that form an unshakable foundation of knowledge. Based on this knowledge, we can safely answer the most contentious and important questions in order to lead a rational and happy life.

Thus, although the distinction of 'commonly, specially, and most specially' is not a division of a genus into narrower kinds, it is also not merely a distinction of different senses in different contexts. Rather, what we actually have is a certain 'hierarchy' of the different contexts and senses and of the corresponding

referents.²⁴ As we move to the next context, the criteria become more technical, based on more specialized expertise, and the previously accepted ones in preceding contexts lose their criterial status and become disqualified. On the top of this hierarchy is the most special sense according to which, as Sextus remarks, the everyday criteria are no more called 'criteria' and only the Dogmatists' logical ones are recognized as such.

The next question we need to raise is the following: Which are these everyday (*biōtika*) criteria? The most plausible interpretation is that they are both the natural criteria, such as sight, hearing and taste, as well as the measuring instruments, such as scales and rulers, i.e., those mentioned in the first two steps of the distinction 'commonly, specially and most specially' (Brunschiwig 1988, 164, followed by Brennan 1994, 156). One objection could be that the senses, classified by Sextus under the first step of the distinction, could also fall under the third, i.e., under the most special sense, provided that the Epicureans, for example, considered the senses to be a criterion of truth. Therefore, according to the most special sense, the senses could at the same time be recognized as a logical criterion and not recognized as such in so far as they were a natural everyday criterion.²⁵ It seems to me that the contradiction is merely apparent. Dogmatists like Epicurus may develop the doctrine that the senses are the criterion of truth. In this case, the senses are accepted as a logical criterion because of the sophisticated technical arguments in support of them and because of the philosophical purpose they are supposed to serve; deprived of the supporting arguments and the philosophical purpose, they are merely an everyday criterion which, according to the most special sense of criterion, no longer qualifies as a criterion.

Further problems arises if Sextus' account of the Pyrrhonian practical criterion in *PH* 1. 23 is taken into consideration. According to this account the Pyrrhonians rely on a fourfold everyday observance: first, nature's guidance, by which they are naturally capable of perceiving and thinking, second, necessitation of feelings, like hunger and thirst, third, tradition of customs and laws, and fourth, teaching of kinds of expertise. As Brennan (1994, 156) has noticed the everyday criteria of the distinction 'commonly, specially, and most specially', for instance the senses and the measuring instruments respectively 'fall under the first and the fourth subgroup' of the Pyrrhonian practical criterion. But, are the senses, for example, considered to work differently when they fall under the threefold distinction of the criterion of reality and when they fall

24 Jonathan Barnes, comparing the distinction we have in Sextus and the similar distinction in Porphyry's *Introduction*, underlines that in Sextus we have some kind of 'hierarchy' which we do not have in Porphyry (2003, 163).

25 For a similar observation cf. Bett 2005, 9, n. 16.

under the fourfold everyday observance of the Pyrrhonian practical criterion? For instance, can we say that when the senses are used commonly as a criterion of reality, they lead to claims like ‘It is true, I have seen it with my own eyes,’ while the Pyrrhonians who use them as part of their practical criterion can only say things like “I do this because I trust my eyes”? I will attempt to answer this question in the next section.

Now, let us summarize what we have seen about the first distinction – between the criterion of reality and the practical criterion – and the second distinction in the senses of the criterion of reality. Both form a hierarchy, based on priority and authoritative relationships, at the top of which stand the Dogmatists’ logical criterion. This hierarchy is not something that the dogmatic philosophers explicitly argue about. It is rather taken for granted and seems to be founded on the preconception of the criterion and the related beliefs like the ones we initially detected in Sextus’ preceding preamble. In short these beliefs are the following: the criterion of truth disputed by the philosophers exists; everyday criteria commonly trusted for determining truth presuppose the philosophers’ criterion; the philosophers’ criterion has the authority to test them and determine to what extent they are worthy of being trusted; this super criterion is necessary for leading a reasonable and happy life and requires the philosophers’ special efforts and skills to be found and used for that purpose.

4 Measuring instruments and Sextus’ strategy against the criterion

Further on, Sextus presents a third distinction, drawn by analogy with the process of using measuring instruments, which divides the philosophers’ logical criterion into three parts (*M* 7. 35–37). As he remarks, in the same way that for the determination of the straight and crooked objects there is need for the craftsman and the ruler and its application, in just the same way in philosophy, too, we need the human being, ‘by whom’ the judgement occurs, sense-perception and thought, ‘through which’ the judgement occurs and correspondingly the application of the sense impression, ‘by virtue of which’ the judgment occurs; and all these three are called ‘criteria’.

The Pyrrhonians, or perhaps Sextus himself, took over and adapted an older distinction ‘founded on the image of a person using an instrument’ (Striker 1996, 69), a distinction likely developed with an eclectic approach around the turn of the Common Era.²⁶ As we have seen, the analogy between the criterion of truth and the measuring instruments made plausible the idea that there was

26 For the origin of this distinction, see Striker 1996, 68–71.

no need and no room for any argumentative process to establish or to deny the truth of a certain type of primary and elementary judgements; the criterion of truth guarantees their immediate truth in the same way that the ruler guarantees immediately whether something is straight or crooked. However, the analogy implies that some kind of process is still necessary, even if it is not argumentative but just mechanical. The distinction 'by whom', 'through which' and 'in virtue of which' represents the necessary conditions for such a process and accordingly divides the logical criterion, i.e., the philosophers' criterion of reality, which was supposed to function similarly to measuring instruments.

Now, Sextus' critical arguments against the criterion are organized into three sections according to these three criteria: the criterion 'by whom' (*M* 7.263–342), 'through which' (343–369) and 'in virtue of which' (370–439). But the use of this distinction does not merely serve the purpose of grouping together and arranging the arguments against the Dogmatists' doctrines. It transforms these arguments into a strategy that works exhaustively and methodically against the criterion. Thus, Sextus reaches the conclusion (439): '... nothing is the criterion, given that neither the "by which", nor the "through which", nor the "in virtue of which" is firm in its knowledge'. And, later, in response to the Dogmatists' objection 'how on earth does the Skeptic declare that nothing is a criterion?' (440) he clarifies that the target of this strategy goes beyond each of the Dogmatists' doctrines; the target is the common trust in the existence of the criterion of truth. He writes:

We are not abolishing the criterion when we avail ourselves of the arguments against it, but we want to show that the existence of a criterion is not entirely reliable (*ou pantōs piston esti to einai kritērion*), since equal resources are mustered for the opposite case.

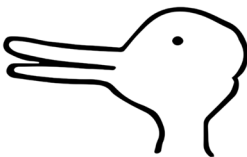
SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, *M* 7.443–444

As Sextus reminds his reader, he follows the Skeptics' common practice (*ethos*) 'to refrain from making the case for things that are trusted, but, in their case, to be content with the common preconception as a sufficient basis (*hōs autarkei kataskeuēi tēi koinēi prolēpsei*) – but to make the case for the things that seem not to be trustworthy, and to bring each of them into equal strength with the trust surrounding the things deemed worthy of acceptance' (443). Therefore, Sextus' strategy against the criterion aims to counterbalance the trust in its existence provided by the common preconception on the matter. After the skeptical investigation, the Skeptics not only did not trust the Dogmatists, who claimed to have already found the criterion of truth, but they also did not trust the initial common optimistic belief that the criterion of truth philosophers argued about, which was supposed to function like measuring instruments,

actually existed to be found. The Dogmatists' failure, throughout the entire philosophical tradition, in achieving any firm knowledge of the necessary conditions for a criterion that functions similarly to measuring instruments counterbalances the convincing power of the idea that there is such a criterion of truth. Therefore, the common trust in the existence of the criterion of truth, as discussed by philosophers, is counterbalanced, and the alleged common preconception of the criterion based on the measuring analogy, is undermined.

Equally undermined was the second common belief entailed by the measuring analogy that we detected in Sextus' preamble: the belief that measuring instruments presuppose the criterion about which the philosophers argue. Moreover, if such a criterion is not there to be found, the hierarchy of criteria formed under the authoritative priority of the philosophers' logical criterion, which we detected in Sextus' distinctions of 'criterion of reality vs practical criterion' and criterion 'commonly, specially and most specially,' collapses: perhaps nothing beyond the everyday practices has the authority to determine to what extent the everyday criteria that are commonly trusted for determining truth are worthy of being trusted. Therefore, the common conviction that we can trust our eyes and the ruler and the scale, and in general what might be called 'everyday criteria,' is not swept away along with the criteria of truth proposed by the Dogmatists. On the contrary, the Pyrrhonians defended the everyday criteria insofar as their strategy against the criterion denied the claimed authority of the logical criterion over them.

But the Pyrrhonians had neither come to the conclusion that the philosophers' criterion was not there to be found, nor had they concluded that the truths we rely on in everyday life were enough and there was no need for further philosophical investigation. Having shown that 'the existence of a criterion is not entirely reliable, since equal resources are mustered for the opposite case,' they suspended judgement on the matter on one hand, and on the other, they kept on investigating. Meanwhile, they could follow their practical criterion, i.e., the 'apparent' (*to phainomenon*: *M* 7.30 and *PH* 2.21–22) in its ambiguity, and see what they were relying on in the fourfold observance of life as a magical image, like the Wittgensteinian duck-rabbit image (*Philosophical Investigations*, 194).



The Pyrrhonians could follow what is obvious and reliable in life and take the truth claims customarily made, such as 'It is true, I have seen it with my own eyes' or 'It is straight, I have tested it with the straight edge' as obviously true, insofar as the philosophers' 'super criterion,' which was supposed to question their truth, might not exist. Let us say, seeing these claims as obviously true, they can see the 'duck image'. However, in pursuing philosophical investigation, they might take the very same things to be merely apparent and not really true. Seeing them as questionable and perhaps as merely apparent, they can see the 'rabbit image.' Seeing both images, the Pyrrhonians suspend judgement.

Furthermore, the Pyrrhonian attack on the criterion of truth is not only a defense of everyday criteria; it is also a defense of the Pyrrhonian non-doctrinal way of philosophizing. If the existence of the criterion that philosophers were searching for 'is not entirely reliable,' then the Dogmatists' logic, which was supposed to start from elementary judgements formed through the criterion of truth, need not be accepted as reliable method of obtaining knowledge and offering doctrines. By suspending judgement on the existence of the criterion, the Pyrrhonians resist dogmatism or what Sextus calls Dogmatic fabrications (*PH* 2. 9: *dogmatikē heuresilogia*). Therefore, the Pyrrhonians, while arguing on both sides of a question – for instance, that honey might not be sweet, and snow might not be white – can claim to be not sophists but serious philosophers who persist in the original way of philosophical investigation.²⁷

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27 See Tigani 2017, Perin 2020, Veres 2020 for an interpretation according to which Sextus conceives of Skepticism not solely as a concerted attack on Dogmatic philosophy, but primarily as an investigation, in the original philosophical spirit, in contrast to the Dogmatists' doctrines, which may not even deserve the name 'philosophy'.

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