

Aquinas vs. the Skeptic

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In his *Summa Theologiae*, Saint Thomas Aquinas presents several different arguments against skepticism. Two of these arguments involve the claim that the skeptic falls into a self-contradiction. In contrast, the most famous of all ancient skeptics, Sextus Empiricus, argues that the skeptic need not fall into a self-contradiction. While Aquinas does not mention Sextus Empiricus, it is interesting to contrast their two opposed positions and to ask who is right.

The first and shorter of Aquinas' arguments is in his discussion of whether the existence of God is self-evident (*Summa Theologiae*, Part I, Question 2, Article 1, Ob. 3 and Reply to Obj. 3). An objection says that "the existence of truth is self-evident. For whoever denies the existence of truth grants that truth does not exist: and, if truth does not exist, then the proposition 'Truth does not

exist' is true: and if there is anything true, there must be truth." While Aquinas denies that God's existence is self-evident to us, he does agree with the portion of the objection just quoted.

The second argument is a bit longer (*Summa Theologiae*, Part I, Question 85, Article 2):

1. If the mind knows only its own impressions, then it can judge only of those impressions.
2. If the mind can only judge of its own impressions, then every judgment will be equally true. (For we cannot be mistaken about how things seem to us.)
3. If every judgment is equally true, then contradictories would be true simultaneously.
4. So, if the mind knows only its own impressions, then contradictories are simultaneously true. (from 1+2+3)
5. But contradictories cannot be simultaneously true.
6. So, the mind does not know only its own impressions. (from 4+5)

Thus Aquinas tries to show in two different ways that the skeptic contradicts himself. First, it is a contradiction to affirm as a truth that there is no truth. Second, it is contradictory to assert that we only know impressions in

our own minds, for then every opinion would be equally true, including any pair of contradictories.

In his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus Empiricus contrasts skepticism with what he calls “dogmatism.” The “dogmatists” are those philosophers “who think they have found the truth, such as Aristotle, Epicurus, the Stoics, and certain others” (Chapter I). In his very first chapter, Sextus writes: “We declare at the outset that we do not make any positive assertion that anything we shall say is wholly as we affirm it to be. We merely report accurately on each thing as our impressions of it are at the moment.” In Chapter VII, Sextus asks, “Does the Skeptic Dogmatize?” He answers that the skeptic does not dogmatize. The skeptic, of course, assents to feelings which derive from sense-impressions; when feeling cold, for example, he would not say “I believe I am not cold.” But concerning non-evident things, the skeptic holds no opinion. The skeptic does not even dogmatize when he is uttering the skeptical formula in regard to non-evident things. As the skeptic understand it, the formula “All things are false” asserts its own falsity together with that of all other things, and the formula “Nothing is true” likewise. Other versions of the skeptical formula are the utterances “no more” or “I determine nothing,” and

Sextus grants that this “no more” asserts not only of other things but of itself also that it is “no more” existent than anything else, and hence cancels itself together with the other things. So, Sextus concludes, the skeptic is not dogmatizing, since he grants that he utters his own formulae in such a way that they cancel themselves; he is not inconsistently carving out an exception to his own formula for that formula itself: “...in the enunciation of these formulae he is saying what appears to him and is reporting his own feeling without indulging in opinion or making positive statements about the reality of things outside himself.” In short, we might describe the skeptic as a radical phenomenologist who only ever describes the contents of his own consciousness, while permanently bracketing the question of whether the impressions in his mind correspond to anything outside of it. And one of the impressions he has is this: it seems to him that he only knows his own impressions, not the way things are outside of his own mind. Things seem this way to him because, as Sextus explains in his “ten modes,” observers always observe from a certain perspective, and the same things appear differently to different observers based on variations in that perspective due to physiological, spatial, cultural,

psychological, or other differences among observers or even in the same observer at different times (Chapter XIV).

Does Sextus Empiricus evade Aquinas' charge of self-contradiction?

The crux of his reply would clearly be his claim that he is merely describing the ways things appear to him, not making positive assertions about the reality of things outside of himself. If this were true, then perhaps he could avoid contradicting himself. However, there are five reasons for thinking that Sextus is being disingenuous.

(1) In the first place, he is after all engaged in a debate with so-called dogmatists, whom he castigates as "demented braggarts" (first mode) and "a rather conceited class of people" (third mode). If all we ever did was describe how things seem to us, we could never even engage in a debate. If two people say to each other "abortion seems wrong to me" and "abortion does not seem wrong to me," they are not really contradicting each other and thus they are not yet engaged in a real debate. Only when they say "abortion is wrong" and "abortion is not wrong" do we have a genuine

disagreement and thus the basis for a debate. Likewise, if the skeptic merely says, “It seems to me I can’t know things outside my mind,” and the dogmatist merely says, “It seems to me I can know things outside my mind,” then the two are not really disagreeing or engaging in a debate at all. But Sextus gives numerous arguments against dogmatism, so he is saying much more than “dogmatism seems unjustified to me.” He is saying “dogmatism is unjustified.”

(2) In the second place, his ten modes are filled with detailed assertions about the natural world, human and animal physiology, human psychology, anthropology, etc. Thus we find him asserting in the second mode that “for some people beef is easier to digest than rock fish, and some suffer diarrhea from cheap Lesbian wine,” and that hemlock, opium, the sting of scorpions, snakebites, hellebore, pepper, Indian food, and the smell of fried fish all affect different people in different ways. In general, he observes, “the fact that we enjoy different things is indicative of a difference in the sense impressions that we get from the external objects.” From this he infers that “we are, perhaps, able to say what each external object appears to be from our several different points of view, but we are unable to give an account of its true

essence,” about which we must therefore suspend judgment. Sextus deploys vast erudition in laying out the reasons why we can never know the natures of things. We are left pondering the paradox of a man who cites fact after fact about the world in order to persuade us that we can’t actually know any facts about the world. The very assertion that different observers have different points of view is a claim about how the world is, not merely about how it seems to me.

(3) In the third place, the very logic of his arguments is such that Sextus Empiricus cannot avoid making positive claims about things outside of his mind. Each of his ten modes involves some variant of the claim that the same thing appears differently to different observers. For example, “The coat which appears yellowish-orange to men with bloodshot eyes does not appear so to me, yet it is the same coat. And the same honey that appears sweet to me appears bitter to those suffering from jaundice” (Chapter XIV, Fourth Mode). “Also, the same boat appears small and stationary from a distance, and large and moving from close by. And the same tower appears round from afar but square from near by” (Chapter XIV, Fifth Mode). Now to assert that the same coat appears to have a different color to different

observers, or the same honey tastes sweet or bitter to different people, is to presuppose that there is a single stable entity – the coat or the honey – to which one can apply a label. That label captures something about the nature of the thing. To apply a general term is to abstract form from matter so as to arrive at a universal, and every universal captures some aspect of a thing's nature. Two people cannot discern that they have different perceptions of the same thing unless they share a common knowledge of that thing, a knowledge that, like the thing itself, transcends the mind of each observer.

(4) In the fourth place, it is telling that Sextus Empiricus goes to great lengths to argue that the skeptic does not contradict himself in advancing the skeptical position. There are in general two reasons for avoiding a contradiction. The first is that no contradiction can be true. The second is that non-contradiction is a necessary condition for the very intelligibility of discourse of any sort: if I contradict myself, I make it impossible for others to understand what I am saying. Why, then, does Sextus seek to avoid self-contradiction? Presumably it is because he thinks he is advancing a true position, one which he supports with a series of sophisticated arguments, each of which also of course presupposes the

principle of non-contradiction. He also understands enough about the rational nature of his human readers to appreciate that he will not be making himself clear to them if he contradicts himself.

(5) Fifthly, Sextus Empiricus calls himself a skeptic and contrasts the skeptic with the dogmatist (Chapter I). He describes skepticism as an ability to place in antithesis the opposing arguments on any given question, to recognize that “to every argument an equal argument is opposed,” then to suspend judgment on the question and feel mental tranquility (Chapters IV, VI). But Sextus Empiricus is inconsistent. In his ten modes, he only presents the arguments for skepticism, not those against it. If to every argument an equal argument is opposed, then there must be equally strong arguments against skepticism as there are for it, and Sextus would have to suspend judgment on skepticism itself. He would presumably then have to stop calling himself a skeptic, something he does not seem willing to do.

Clearly, Sextus does not think that the dogmatist’s opinion is as close to the truth as his own, and in debating the dogmatist, he is doing more than merely describing how things seem to him. He is asserting that he knows that he knows nothing. He is a skeptic about

everything except skepticism itself. In denying dogmatism and marshalling logic and empirical evidence to refute it, Sextus ends up thinking like a dogmatist himself. He presupposes the reliability of his own mind in attempting to prove its unreliability. Aquinas is right: the skeptic contradicts himself.