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SHOULD THE SKEPTIC LIVE HIS SKEPTICISM? NIETZSCHE AND CLASSICAL SKEPTICISM

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I argue here that Nietzsche's seemingly contradictory claims relative to skepticism require us to distinguish various strands of skepticism that inform his thought. An investigation of Nietzsche's interpretation of Pyrrhonic skepticism reveals that while he recognizes the power of its critique, it fails to be sufficiently courageous and creative in its response to that critique.

I. INTRODUCTION

There should be no doubt that skepticism plays a prominent role throughout Nietzsche's philosophical career. Yet while this fact has not gone entirely unnoticed in the voluminous literature on Nietzsche's philosophy, it has received a surprising lack of systematic attention. Furthermore, with few exceptions, those who have written on Nietzsche and skepticism have generally oversimplified Nietzsche's understanding of skepticism, frequently regarding it as solely involving the now traditional skeptical doubts about truth, reality, and, par-

ticularly, our knowledge of the external world. In this paper I want to begin to fill out the more complex picture that emerges when the consideration of Nietzsche's engagement with skepticism includes the much earlier, but enormously influential, views of Pyrrhonic skepticism. By doing so, I hope to show that this issue deserves more serious attention than it has received to date, and that what might be considered the standard reading of Nietzsche's conception of skepticism is misguided. Finally, I will try to show that Nietzsche has a response to the radical skepticism of the Pyrrhonists that, while largely ignored, merits consideration alongside the well known responses of Michael Frede, Myles Burnyeat, and Jonathan Barnes.

II. NIETZSCHE AND SKEPTICISM

In order to understand Nietzsche's attitude toward skepticism, it is crucial to distinguish two *types* of skepticism.[1] As Benson Mates has recently pointed out,

> Modern formulations of epistemological skepticism nearly always involve the term 'external world' or some other term (e.g. 'reality' or 'nature') that plays essentially the same philosophical role (Mates (1996), p. 17).

Presumably, these formulations are a result of the emphasis Descartes placed on overcoming the various kinds of doubt he explores in the First Meditation; frequently, then, "skepticism" in contemporary discussions is taken simply to be equivalent to

[1] One might well take the Academic skepticism of Arcesilaus and Carneades to represent a third kind of skepticism, and one with which Nietzsche was undoubtedly familiar; however, Academic skepticism is not germane to the specific contrast being drawn here.

the now traditional doubts about our knowledge of the external world.

A much different sort of skeptical tradition, however, contrasts with this modern version – namely, classical Pyrrhonic skepticism. Pyrrhonic skepticism does not restrict itself just to epistemological or just to ontological (or even just to normative) claims, but seeks to provide a general approach to life. As we will see below, Pyrrhonic skepticism adopts the position that any claim to certainty – including the claims to ignorance of the Academic skeptics – is (or at least appears to be) dogmatic. The avoidance of dogmatism leads to the suspension of belief (*epochē*) and, in turn, tranquillity (*ataraxia*). As Mates remarks,

> the Pyrrhonist, unlike the post-Cartesian skeptic, makes no categorical assertions and advances no doctrine whatever, whether concerning knowledge or anything else. He assents only to statements that report his own *pathe* of the present moment, and on these matters it seems that we are hardly in a position to take issue with him (Mates (1996), p. 69).

In short, then, Pyrrhonic skepticism, in contrast to Cartesian or modern versions, does not concern itself (solely) with technical philosophical questions, but offers, much more generally, a way of life. In Sextus Empiricus's formulation, "the causal origin of the Skeptic Way is the hope of attaining *ataraxia*" (in Mates (1996), p. 90). As Annas and Barnes make the point:

> For Pyrrho scepticism had been a way of life. In the arguments between the Academic skeptics and their opponents scepticism became a part of professional philosophy. And at the same time epistemological issues came to be seen as the fundamental questions of philosophy (Annas and Barnes (1985), p. 14).

The failure to observe this distinction can lead, and has led, to systematic problems in interpreting Nietzsche's remarks relative to skepticism, by treating "skepticism" as referring unequivocally to Cartesian skepticism about the external world, a conflation Nietzsche's own ambiguous usage, on occasion, encourages. One can see the result in Peter Poellner's recent, and generally quite careful, discussion of Nietzsche and skepticism, which has the virtue of focusing on the significance of skepticism for Nietzsche's thought; as he argues, in Nietzsche's work one finds "a pervasive sceptical strand of thought" (1995, p. 11). Yet when referring to certain views of Heidegger on this topic, Poellner questions whether these remarks of Heidegger "represent an adequate description of the sceptical problem *even in its original Cartesian form*" (*ibid*, p. 77; my emphasis). (Much later in his treatment, Poellner suggest that Nietzsche could have deflected the frequent criticism that his claims are all too often self-referentially inconsistent had "he claimed no more for his pronouncements than that 'this is how things appear to me now'" (*ibid*, p. 294). He fails to note, however, that this is precisely the standard form the claims of the Pyrrhonist take.) Moreover, few of those debating whether Nietzsche himself was a skeptic pause to distinguish the *kind* of skepticism, if any, to which he is committed. Thus Arthur Danto claims that Nietzsche *is* a skeptic ((1980), p. 72), while Alexander Nehamas asserts that he is *not* ((1985), p. 83). To fail to say what *kind* of skepticism is involved here is to neglect an issue that fundamentally informs this debate, and it is only by making explicit what Nietzsche means by "skepticism" in a given context can we hope to provide an adequate interpretation of his remarks. I return to this debate briefly in concluding this discussion.

In general, then, scholarly treatments of Nietzsche have either ignored the topic of skepticism,[2] regarded his conception of skepticism as Cartesian in orientation, or, at best, left the term "skepticism" itself equivocal and ambiguous. The only exception I have found is Adi Parush's "Nietzsche on the Skeptic's Life" (1976), an account which is hampered by a prob-

[2] To mention only some of the recent English language work: no reference is made to skepticism in Strong (1988) or White (1990). Schrift (1990) mentions, but does not develop, the notion of a "skeptical nihilism". In his lengthy (1983), Richard Schacht has no discussion for skepticism, although he refers to the problem of science and "fundamental skepticism" (p. 89); Clark (1990) omits the topic although, in another sense, the entire book is about skepticism, at least in its Cartesian form. While Kaufmann mentions skepticism five times in his (1974), four are references to the same passage, the admittedly important *Antichrist* 54, and the other to a critic (Rudolf Thiel) of Stefan George's. Surprisingly, Tejara's (1987) almost completely ignores the topic. Although Wilcox, in his (1974) has the merit of devoting a chapter to "Kant, the Thing In Itself, and Nietzsche's Skepticism," he only gets to the issue of skepticism in the final two pages of this chapter, hardly doing it justice. Furthermore, Wilcox takes Nietzsche's skepticism to revolve around his rejection of the Kantian doctrine of the *Ding an sich*, a common but much too narrow interpretation of Nietzsche's concerns with skepticism. In similar fashion, Stack notes that Nietzsche's "skepticism is twofold. Not only can we not know things-in-themselves, but the process of expressing judgements about what we perceive is a simplification and metaphorical transformation of our immediate experience of unique particulars," "Kant, Lange, and Nietzsche" in Ansell-Pearson (1991), p. 34. Perhaps most useful is Grimm's (1977), which takes up many of the relevant issues in his insightful account. But even here, the topic of skepticism is not addressed directly in any place in his book. I have not even attempted to take into consideration the vast literature on Nietzsche, frequently if not entirely justly labelled "post-modern," that addresses these topics. See, e.g. Granier (1966), and Kofman (1972).

lematic characterization of skepticism and a tendency to conflate the Pyrrhonist's position with that of David Hume. For instance, Parush refers to "skeptics like Sextus Empiricus and Hume" (p. 538), while, on the following page, he cites Hume's objections to Pyrrhonic skepticism that indicate precisely the significant differences *between* the two. In any case, at this point we have no systematic discussion of Nietzsche and skepticism, and I make no claims at all to provide one here. Nor do I seek to minimize the significance the development of "modern" skepticism – namely, the long and continuing history of reactions due to Descartes's formulation in the First Meditation (among others') – for Nietzsche's philosophy. I merely hope to re-focus attention on the neglected role Pyrrhonic skepticism played in Nietzsche's general understanding of, and attitude toward, skepticism.

That this issue has been neglected is surprising on at least two counts. First, and perhaps most obvious, is the large number of references to skepticism throughout Nietzsche's works, from the 1872 (unpublished) "The Last Philosopher," through "The Wanderer and His Shadow," *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Gay Science*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and *The Antichrist*, as well as numerous late remarks in the *Nachlaß*, including those collected under the title *The Will to Power*. Nietzsche was, then, concerned with skepticism and its implications during his entire philosophical career and refers to these issues in what, on any interpretation, must be regarded as his most significant texts. Indeed, his views can often be seen in terms of his development of a sophisticated response to these implications.[3]

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[3] This has been shown quite persuasively by Poellner; see (1995) particularly chapters 2, 3, and 6.

A second – more "biographical" – reason to examine Nietzsche's relationship with Pyrrhonic skepticism results from consideration of his often neglected philological texts. One of his earliest works is a long treatment, in Latin, of the sources of the philosophical biographer Diogenes Laertius, *De Laertii Diogenis Fontibus*, published in 1868 by the Rheinisches Museum. This was followed by two shorter works on Diogenes, one in Latin and a "*Gratulationschrift*" in German which serve, in effect, as appendices to the longer work. This material comes to 168 pages in the Colli-Montinari edition of Nietzsche's works; as William Schaberg notes,

> Diogenes Laertius, the third-century author of *Lives of the Philosophers*, and the question of his sources was Nietzsche's main ongoing interest and the topic represented well over half of his philological publications ((1995), p. 11).

While for the most part this is a technical philological treatment of Diogenes' sources, it should be remembered that his *Lives of the Philosophers*, along with Cicero's *Academica* and Sextus Empiricus's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, served for centuries as the main account of classical skepticism, in particular Pyrrhonic skepticism.[4]

It is clear from Nietzsche's academic career, as well as his published and unpublished writings, that he was quite familiar with the views of ancient skepticism. It is also clear, from his deep engagement with Diogenes' texts, that he was familiar specifically with Pyrrhonic skepticism, in that Diogenes devotes

[4] Barnes and Annas ((1985), pp. 5-6) note that Diogenes Laertius's text had been available in Latin from 1430, adding "it was the Latin translation of Diogenes which introduced the word *scepticus* into modern European thought."

a relatively long chapter to Pyrrho, as well as a chapter to Pyrrho's follower, Timon. But this adds to the fascination about what texts Nietzsche employed as source material for skepticism. As is well known, Diogenes is a notoriously unreliable source, often interested as much in gossip as in accurately reporting philosophical doctrines. A much more reliable source for ancient skepticism is Sextus Empiricus, a physician who flourished in the second century A.D./C.E. Given his life long involvement – at times approaching obsession – with Greek culture and thought, and the remarkable erudition he displays with respect to Greek philosophy and literature, there is a remarkable lack of attention paid to Sextus by Nietzsche. Certainly, from the published works, one might well conclude that Nietzsche had not even read Sextus.[5] This would be, at least, surprising: Sextus had been given broad currency in the West-

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5 Indeed, before some important passages in Nietzsche's early (and unpublished) work were pointed out to me by an anonymous referee, this was precisely the conclusion I had drawn in an earlier draft. Yet, while Nietzsche does refer to Sextus in the "*Gratulationschrift*" mentioned earlier, I hesitate to see that passage as evidence of an extensive engagement with Sextus's text. In the five volume *Frühe Schriften* of Nietzsche's work, edited by Hans Joachim Mette, Karl Schlechta, and Carl Koch (Munich: C.H. Beck Verlag, 1994), Sextus is mentioned nine times; while most of the references are quite brief – often wholly bibliographical – Nietzsche does cite Sextus's text twice, once at some length (*Pros Mathematikous* VI. 63; cited in vol. IV., p. 328). Although this suggests greater familiarity with Sextus than the published work would indicate, it is a difficult question, worth further study, to see if the various historical strands feeding into Nietzsche's understanding of classical skepticism owe more to Diogenes – as one might assume – and what, if any, inadequacies in that understanding might be due to a reliance on Diogenes, relative to Sextus. I am grateful to this referee for pointing out these passages I would otherwise have missed.

ern philosophy since Henri Estienne's translation of 1562. As Charles Schmitt notes, through this translation and the resulting reactions from Montaigne, Charron, Bayle, and many others, "the seventeenth century saw the establishment of the skeptical philosophy as a permanent feature on the intellectual map of modern Europe" ((1983), p. 238); of particular influence was Montaigne, a favorite author of Nietzsche's, through whose 1580 *Apology for Raymond Sebond* skepticism became a staple of the philosophical diet. (Even Descartes, well known for his lack of interest in many of the philosophical currents of his day, could not avoid the issues that Sextus had raised and Montaigne had popularized – both his First Meditation and the strategy *vis à vis* clear and distinct ideas outlined in the Fourth Meditation provide sufficient evidence of this.) But this also tells us something about Nietzsche's understanding of skepticism – namely that his information is more than likely informed for the most part by Diogenes, and that his most important and best informed (albeit third-hand) source was Montaigne. In turn, as Brendan Donnellan has noted, "Montaigne is one of the few literary and philosophical figures for whom Nietzsche has practically no criticism." He further remarks that:

> The Frenchman's basic experience was that there is no certainty in knowledge. Even if this insight had already been treated more methodically by the Pyrrhonist sceptics, and was taken up after Montaigne by the English sensualists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Montaigne's conviction must have been all the more arresting for Nietzsche, in that it was expressed through his personal feeling, unsystematically, and in lay terms, prefiguring the German's rejection of the obscure jargon and abstract reasoning of the "professional" philosopher ((1986), pp. 15-16; 7).

I should add here that, from the evidence I have found, Nietzsche pays little if any attention to other ancient skeptics such as Carneades or Aenesidemus, makes only passing mention of Arcesilaus, and discusses Cicero solely in terms of his reputation in rhetoric. This may only show us that Nietzsche's reading of the skeptics is no more systematic and careful than his reading of Rousseau or Hume. But it should be sufficiently obvious that, for the various reasons outlined above, we must be very careful in making clear what Nietzsche means when he refers to "skepticism."

As noted, current discussions of skepticism – particularly in the context of Nietzsche's work – tend to emphasize doubts about the external world. As also noted, this is a much narrower conception of skepticism than that prominent in the New Academy, or was the focus of Pyrrhonism. (Remnants of the earlier approach, and specifically the strategy it adopts, can be seen in Descartes and Hume, as well as in the "Antinomies" of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.) To help draw the connections between classical skepticism and Nietzsche's account, I want to take a quick detour to outline that strategy employed by the Pyrrhonic skeptics.

III. PYRRHONIC SKEPTICISM: METHOD AND STRATEGY

What distinguishes Pyrrhonic skepticism, above all, is its method. Simply put, the skeptic claims that for any assertion "*p*," an equally strong argument can be made for "not *p*." This technique generates what are known as equipollent arguments, opposing arguments of equal strength. A variety of modes, or tropes (*tropoi*) were developed, based on various aspects of the subject and object involved in the assertion, in order to generate this equipollent opposition, or *isostheneia*; in

addition to the standard set of ten tropes of Aenesidemus, Sextus refers to several other sets.[6] Such tropes included judgements made relative to a given subject (human or animal, or healthy human and ill human), or relative to one sense or another. Schematically, the strategy takes the following form (Annas and Barnes (1985), pp. 24-25), where "*F*" and "*F**" refer to incompatible properties, and "*S*" and "*S**" to the particular circumstance of the trope.

1) *x* appears *F* in *S*
1') *x* appears *F** in *S**

Because appearance claims are equipollent

2) we cannot prefer *S* to *S**

therefore

3) we can neither affirm nor deny that *x* is really *F* or *F**.

From this opposition, we are, according to the skeptic, forced to suspend judgement; in this way, *isostheneia* yields this suspension, or *epochē*. A traditional expression of *epochē* is the representative Pyrrhonic saying "No more (this than that) [*ouden mallon tode e tode*]." Finally, in a somewhat indirect way, *epochē* gives rise to tranquillity, or peace of mind – *ataraxia*.

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[6] Sextus refers to the Ten Modes, or Tropes, of "the older skeptics" in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I.36 and attributes them to Aenesidemus at *Against the Mathematicians* VII. 345; elsewhere, a set of Eight Modes against causal explanation is attributed to Aenesidimus (*Outlines* I.180), a set of Five Modes is described by Sextus (*Outlines* I.164) and attributed to Agrippa by Diogenes Laertius (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* IX 88-89), and even an attempt to reduce the modes to a set of two is described by Sextus (*Outlines* I.78-79).

How *ataraxia* comes about is best captured in a well-known anecdote of Sextus's:

> It is said that once upon a time, when he was painting a horse and wished to depict the horse's froth, he failed so completely that he gave up and threw his sponge at the picture – the sponge on which he used to wipe the paints from his brush – and that in striking the picture the sponge produced the desired effect. So, too, the Skeptics were hoping to achieve *ataraxia* by resolving the anomaly of phenomena and noumena, and, being unable to do this, they suspended judgment. But then, by chance as it were, when they were suspending judgment the *ataraxia* followed, as a shadow follows the body (Mates (1996), p. 93).

In short, *ataraxia* arises – spontaneously and involuntarily – as a result of *epochē*: it is something that happens to us, it isn't something we consciously choose to adopt, or strive to achieve.

Two preliminary points help start to bring this discussion back to Nietzsche. First, neither Pyrrhonic skepticism nor Nietzsche's perspectivism entails relativism.[7] While the relativist claims, for example, "*x* is *F* for me," the Pyrrhonist rests content with the claim "*x* appears *F*." It is the assertoric form

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that is rejected by the Pyrrhonist.[8] The similarity to Nietzsche's views may be seen by the report given about the Pyrrhonists by Diogenes Laertius:

> ... we recognize that it is day and that we are alive, and many other apparent facts in life: but with regard to the things about which our opponents [*oi dogmatikoi*] argue so positively, claiming to have definitely apprehended them, we suspend judgement because they are not certain, and confine knowledge to our impressions [*ta pathe*] ((1925), p. 515).

Nietzsche's rejection of dogmatism is resonant of this Pyrrhonic approach, although, as we will see, it does *not* generate a similar *result*, and, in fact, hints at Nietzsche's much different response:

> Metaphysics is still needed by some: but so is that impetuous *demand for certainty* that today discharges itself among large numbers of people in a scientific-positivistic form. The demand that one *wants* by all means that something should be firm [*fest*] ... this, too, is still the demand for a support, a prop, in short, that *instinct of weakness* which, to be sure, does not create religious, metaphysical systems, and convictions of all kinds but – preserves them (*FW*, V § 347).

As Richard Schacht has recently noted, Nietzsche's perspectivism, and the "models and metaphors" he uses to present it, characterize:

> his strategy in setting about to tease out aspects of the "truth" about the many matters that concern him, which ... has not yielded itself to philosophical dogmatists in the past, and will continue to elude all those who approach them in a similarly heavy-handed and plodding, blinkered way ((1995), pp. 95-96).

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[8] It should be noted that the Academic skeptics were traditionally criticized for their use of the assertoric form which, in denying the possibility of knowledge, was itself dogmatic.

Thus both the Pyrrhonists and Nietzsche reject what they consider dogmatism – whether the assertoric claims the skeptic's opponent makes, or the metaphysical assertions about the world as it really is, put forth by Nietzsche's opponents, the subtle philosophers.

Second, there is at least the hint of a Pyrrhonic mode, similar to that which generates *epochē* for the skeptic, in Nietzsche's essay "On Truth and Lie." Nietzsche tells us there that it is a difficult thing for a man:

> to admit to himself that the insect or bird perceives an entirely different world from the one that man does, and that the question of which of these perceptions of the world is the more correct one is quite meaningless ... (*PT*, § 86).

We can compare this to a passage in Sextus:

> if the non-rational animals are not less worthy of belief than we are when it comes to deciding about *phantasiai*, and the *phantasiai* differ depending on the variety of animals, then although I shall be ale to say how each of the external objects appears to me, I shall be forced ... to suspend judgment as to how it is in nature (Mates (1996), p. 99).

The same point is put succinctly by Diogenes:

> The *first* mode relates to the differences between living creatures [*zoon*] in respect of those things which give pleasure or pain, or are useful or harmful to them. By this it is inferred that they do not receive the same impressions from the same things, with the result that such a conflict necessarily leads to suspension of judgement ((1925), p. 493).

While this is hardly definitive evidence, it does provide some indication of a similar approach – albeit with radically distinct

presuppositions – between what might be regarded as Nietzsche's nascent perspectivism and the Pyrrhonic tropes with which he was familiar, at least through Diogenes's text. At the same time, Nietzsche's strategy precludes that which is presupposed by the Pyrrhonists: that there is some "fact of the matter" which humans, for a wide variety of reasons, are unable to establish. In contrast, Nietzsche wants to abandon any traditional conception of truth that might ground such a presupposition, and, in doing so, transcend the fatigue of philosophical laboring in order to put in its place his own perspectivism.

Before turning to Nietzsche's reaction to skepticism, I want to note two other points he has in common with the Pyrrhonists. Sextus describes the skeptic as a physician needed to cure the dogmatists of their pretensions; Nietzsche often refers to himself as a physician or therapist – or more viscerally, a vivisectionist – of his culture's pathologies. They also share what is sometimes referred to as the "problem of the criterion" – for Sextus, proving that human criteria, for instance, are superior is to presuppose what one is trying to prove. Nietzsche puts it this way in the *Nachlaß* (*WM*, § 486): "a critique of the faculty of knowledge is senseless: how should a tool be able to criticize itself when it can use only itself for the critique?"[9] Montaigne, who as we know was deeply influenced by Sextus,

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[9] See Sextus Empiricus, (Mates (1996), p. 92); Diogenes Laertius, ((1925), pp. 501 and 503). The point is hardly new: some have seen at least hints of the problem in Socrates's caustic reference to Meno's "debater's point" or "eristic question": see *Meno* 80d. From a different perspective, it is the problem of meta-critique, raised as an objection to Kant by J.G. Hamann. See Beiser (1987), chapter 1. The issue is of course one of considerable contemporary interest, as well; see, e.g. Sellars (1963); Chisholm (1982), especially chapter 5.

puts it succinctly in a passage with which Nietzsche was no doubt familiar:

> To judge the appearances we receive of objects, we would need a judicatory instrument; to verify this instrument, we need a demonstration; to verify the demonstration, an instrument: there we are in a circle ((1957), p. 454).

To be sure, Nietzsche "shares" the problem of the criterion with these earlier thinkers only in the sense that it poses a fundamental problem for those who seek to establish the "truth" of their claims. Nietzsche's willingness to abandon that search, and its presuppositions, allows him to transcend the restricting constraints of such "philosophical laboring" and move beyond them. To use Wittgenstein's phrase, Nietzsche rejects this picture "holding us captive," permitting him to "philosophize with a hammer," in all of the various meanings – both constructive and destructive – of this rich image.

In sum, we get a picture of Pyrrho's position, as seen in the texts of Diogenes Laertius, Sextus Empiricus, and Montaigne, that rejects all forms of dogmatism, that rests content with living on the basis of appearances, and not only denies the value of the search for absolutes and for certainty, but sees in that denial the appropriate path to tranquillity.[10] While Nietzsche concurs with much of the critical aspect of the Pyrrhonists' account, he in turn calls into question their "solution," and, by doing so, calls into question the very value of such "tranquillity." Hence, the very ambiguity of "skepticism"

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[10] This is not, however, to suggest that the skepticism sketched by these various authors forms a consistent, seamless whole; however, the differences, I think, can be safely ignored in the present context.

we find in discussions of Nietzsche is strikingly similar to that which he notes relative to "nihilism."

> Nihilism. It is *ambiguous.*
> A. Nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit: as *active nihilism.*
> B. Nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit: as *passive* nihilism (*WM*, § 22).

Nietzsche's comment, given what we have already seen, indicates that his remarks on skepticism cannot be *reduced* to the relatively narrow conception of Cartesian skepticism, any more than his comments on nihilism can be given a narrow interpretation, but that in both cases must be given a very broad reading. As we will now see, his comment on nihilism also points toward his own response to Pyrrhonic skepticism.

IV. NIETZSCHE'S CRITIQUE OF PYRRHONIC SKEPTICISM

Nietzsche specifically refers to Pyrrho once in the published works, in § 213 of "The Wanderer and His Shadow," where a dialogue occurs between Pyrrho and an old man. It concludes with the old man saying "Alas, friend! Laughing and staying silent – is that now the whole of your philosophy?" Pyrrho responds "It wouldn't be the worst one" (*MAM*, § 362). Without putting forth some sort of developmental hypothesis, it should be noted that the vast majority of Nietzsche's comments on Pyrrho – ten of them, all in the *Nachlaß* from 1885 to 1889 – are negative. Pervasive throughout these remarks are two particular standard Nietzschean terms of criticism – "Buddhist" and variations on *Müdigkeit* (weariness or fatigue). At the same time, even these pejorative terms are delivered with

some ambiguity: thus Nietzsche describes the skeptics as "the only honorable type among the equivocal, quinquivocal [*zwei- bis fünfdeutigen*] tribes of philosophers!" (*EH*, § 3), and that Pyrrho himself saw through the "play-acting" of philosophers and thus "judged as everyone did, namely that in goodness and integrity 'little people' were far superior to philosophers" (*WM*, § 434). Without endorsing the extreme hermeneutical approach of Karl Jaspers – that Nietzsche's philosophy is fundamentally grounded in contradiction – we can at least see here again Nietzsche's ambivalence toward Pyrrho and, more generally, classical skepticism: an honorable approach that, at the same time, is one of fatigue; a "type" of philosopher who is yet superior to "philosophers"; a bold and courageous rejection of philosophical laboring in order to judge "as everyone did."

In any case, the focus of Nietzsche's understanding of skepticism – specifically classical ancient skepticism – seems generally to be that *epochē*, and its resultant *ataraxia*, is characterized by a weary acceptance of the way things are, or appear to be. To be sure, Nietzsche has no systematic or sustained critique of Pyrrhonic skepticism, and untangling the ambiguities in his various remarks on Pyrrho may be impossible. But the consistent charge he levels at the skeptic – and which he uses, at times, to characterize Pyrrhonism – in terms of the various synonyms for "fatigue" suggests that, on Nietzsche's view, the Pyrrhonic skeptic fails to be sufficiently bold in reacting to what results from the rejection of dogmatism. In this way, Nietzsche can describe Pyrrhonic skepticism as both a "*sagacious* weariness," and yet identify it as both "nihilistic" and "a form of Greek decadence" (*WM*, § 437). That is, from a surprising route, the skeptic arrives at an ascetic extreme of slave morality. As Nietzsche puts it in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "skepti-

cism is the most spiritual expression of a complex physiological condition that in ordinary language is called nervous exhaustion and sickliness [*Kränklichkeit*]"; significantly, such people as hold to this view "doubt the 'freedom of the will' even in their dreams" (*JGB*, § 208).

It is worth emphasizing the point that the Pyrrhonists presented a fully developed view on how to live and, simultaneously, to be skeptics, a crucial element of which was accepting the conventions of the society in which they lived. Thus, Diogenes reports that Pyrrho "held that there is nothing really existent [*panton meden einai te aletheia*], but custom and convention govern human action" ((1925), p. 475). Sextus gives a much fuller account in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, presenting a relatively elaborate four-fold set of rules, accepted undogmatically, for the "regulation of life," specifying the guidance of nature, the demands of the body, laws and customs, and training in a specific vocation (Mates (1996), p. 92). As Anthony Long characterizes the position, "The Pyrrhonist accepts the conventions of everyday life as a practical criterion without troubling himself over questions of rational justification" ((1986), pp. 86-87). Again, we find the view echoed in Montaigne, tempered as always by his fideistic outlook: "Since I am not capable of choosing, I accept other people's choices and stay in the position where God put me" ((1957), p. 428). However, the conclusion Montaigne draws from his skeptical scrutiny of various dogmas is considerably different than that of Pyrrho:

> To follow the laws of our country – that is to say, the undulating sea of the opinions of a people or a prince, which will paint me justice in as many colors, and refashion it into as many faces, as there are changes of passion in those men? I cannot have my judgment so flexible ((1957), p. 428).

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In any case, the reliance on convention, in its various guises, serves as the skeptic's "solution" to the traditional, but urgent problem any radical form of skepticism seems forced to confront. Obviously, if the views of the Pyrrhonists are incoherent in some deep sense, one need not pursue further the issue of how one might adopt their recommendations. But if we assume, for the sake of the argument, that skepticism is *logically* consistent, and for that matter "metaphysically" tenable, *how* exactly *does*, or *would*, the skeptic live her skepticism? It is an indication, I think, of Nietzsche's remarkable sensitivity to, and familiarity with, Diogenes's text and the Pyrrhonic position – directly or otherwise – that he is able to ground his critique of the Pyrrhonist "solution" on Diogenes's relatively brief and isolated remark concerning "custom and convention." Even assuming he is not drawing on the more systematic treatment of Sextus here, Nietzsche's rejection of what he takes to be the passivity of Pyrrhonic skepticism can be seen to follow from his rejection of this "solution" as presented by Diogenes, supplemented by Montaigne's account which was itself, of course, in turn informed by Sextus.

Thus we have Nietzsche's unique insight. A skeptic reveals her freedom of spirit and her strength by her unwillingness to remain comfortable with the dogmas and received wisdom of the day, insofar as they are presented as "truths." In this sense, the skeptic demonstrates superior courage, a response easily, if anachronistically, glossed as the will to power. Yet for a skeptic to doubt and to refuse to adopt any assertoric claim – and thus to be unwilling to acquiesce in the dogma of any school – then to turn around and claim that one must live in accordance with the custom and convention of one's society, almost seems designed specifically to infuriate Nietzsche. While the "Preface" to *On the Genealogy of Morals* and Book V of

The Gay Science provide excellent examples of the shape this hostility takes, Nietzsche is perhaps most explicit in § 43 of *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> Are these coming philosophers new friends of "truth"? That is probable enough, for all philosophers so far have loved their truths. But they will certainly not be dogmatists. It must offend their pride, also their taste, if their truth is supposed to be a truth for everyman – which has so far been the secret wish and hidden meaning of all dogmatic aspirations. "My judgment is *my* judgment": no one else is easily entitled to it – that is what such a philosopher of the future may perhaps say of himself.

Indeed, the rejection of such conventions might well be argued to serve as the *leitmotif* of Nietzsche's mature philosophical work. Going well beyond Montaigne's unwillingness to allow such "flexibility" in his views and alleged commitment to fideism, Nietzsche *refuses* to succumb, in a sense seeking to transcend such custom and convention, whether it be the traditional slave morality of Christianity or the intellectual hegemony of science and technology ("It is an illusion that something is *known* when we possess a mathematical formula for an event: it is only designated, described, nothing more!" (*WM*, § 628)). The need to go beyond convention, in whatever form it may take, without claiming to be approaching the "true" or the "real" in any semantically rich, or at least absolute, sense, is the indispensable lesson to be learned from the skeptic.

To be sure, one finds no argument in Nietzsche indicating that the weariness of the Pyrrhonist simply *reduces* to her endorsement of "convention" as a way of life. But that endorsement may well be seen as emblematic of the general problem Nietzsche sees in what results from adopting radical skepticism – namely, an unwillingness to go *beyond* that custom

and convention. *Ataraxia*, as the result of the skeptic's willingness (and need) to suspend judgement, fundamentally prevents that skeptic from engaging in the kind of bold and courageous "revaluation of all values" Nietzsche regards as an indispensable component of philosophy as practiced, for example, by a Zarathustra. In contrast to what Nietzsche seems to regard as the skeptic's "resignation," we see Nietzsche insist on the need for creativity and audacity, whether in philology, epistemology, ontology, aesthetics, or morals. One can see some evidence of this in the history and reception of Nietzsche's own work. Having assumed his professorial duties in Basel, and having published his relatively traditional philological research, Nietzsche's only text that conceivably could be regarded as "conventional" – *The Birth of Tragedy* – not only challenged the prevailing view of Greek tragedy, but called into question the very form philological and historical inquiry should take. The ensuing storm of controversy, as in the exchange of polemics between Wilamowitz-Moellendorf and Erwin Rohde, gives an indication of Nietzsche's ability not only to doubt and dismiss convention (and to provoke), but to go beyond the constraints imposed by convention and create new ways of addressing issues and, ultimately, to seek to create new values themselves. The Pyrrhonist may well call into question the assumptions and commitments of his society – a challenge Nietzsche admires – but is unwilling to take the next step, that of creativity, a step Nietzsche demands of the true philosopher of the future. It is this energy and dynamism, required to pursue that course, that Nietzsche sees as the fundamental failing of a fatigued and "Buddhistic" approach to skepticism.

It is in the concern with truth, and its attainability, that we see the two strands of skepticism – Pyrrhonic and its more modern, post-Cartesian version, come together. The Pyrrho-

nist calls any assertoric claim into doubt, while the modern skeptic questions various claims on the basis of their causal origin. With the latter, we arrive at the "argument from illusion," doubts based on the reliability of perceptual media, memory, etc., among other "traditional" skeptical results. Yet both approaches are grounded in the assumption of a correspondence theory of truth, where a given claim is true if and only if it corresponds in the appropriate way to the world, or to "the facts"; each, for different reasons, and with different results, assert that "truth," so construed, is unreachable. This is not to suggest that the ancient skeptics *employed* the correspondence theory, but that it forms an essential part of the dogmatic attitude they hoped to call into question. Indeed, one might argue that any *contrasting* theories of truth – e.g. the coherence theory – were not even brought up for consideration until the nineteenth century. Thus Frederick Schmitt points out "The correspondence theory is ancient and was endorsed, explicitly or implicitly, by nearly every philosopher who had much to say about truth before the year 1800" ((1995), p. 1). Nietzsche's own claims relative to "truth" are notoriously difficult to reconcile, and form the basis for a charge of self-referential inconsistency, as discussed by Clarke and Poellner, among others. Unfortunately, this important but complex issue must remain unexplored in any detail in the current discussion. Yet it is clear that in addition to endorsing the doubts raised about "truth" by both ancient and modern skeptics, Nietzsche seeks to go beyond those doubts and examine their ramifications: an examination that the skeptics were, in some sense, unable to pursue. As André Comte-Sponville has noted, "It remains that Nietzsche always, or almost always, refused to consider himself a skeptic and that his criticism of the idea of truth goes far beyond the critiques of Montaigne and Hume,

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and for good reason: Montaigne and Hume never critique truth as such!" ((1991), p. 71).

In any case, while both skeptical views share certain conceptual presuppositions, the Pyrrhonist approach becomes much more general, and thus radical, by attacking the very *form* in which *any* claim is made, rather than attacking the source of the reliability of such claims. But Pyrrhonic skepticism, for Nietzsche, fails to take this next, all-important, step beyond. Thus he can *praise* the skeptic for having made evident the possibility of choosing a form of life without dogma, and he can, at the same time, *criticize* the skeptic for having, in the end, surrendered to what Nietzsche would regard as simply another comfortable dogmatic refuge – custom and convention – and a particularly pernicious one at that.

Thus, when Nietzsche does praise skepticism, as in *Antichrist* § 54 – "Zarathustra is a skeptic" – he is talking about yet another *kind* of skepticism than that represented by the submissive, surrendering Pyrrho. (As we will see below, briefly, neither is it the kind of skepticism represented by Descartes.) While the "skeptic of the future" is one for whom "all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again," Nietzsche characterizes the Pyrrhonic skeptic as a passive nihilist. As he observes in one of the poems prefatory to *The Gay Science*, "The Skeptic Speaks," the Nietzschean skeptic is not an inquirer who feels a chill, nor one who vacillates, in the face of eternal inquiry, inquiry that may well ultimately turn out to be futile on any traditional philosophical conception. In contrast to the kind of skepticism Nietzsche endorses, the Pyrrhonic skeptic is ultimately feckless. As Myles Burnyeat has pointed out, "A marked passivity in the face of both his sensations and his own thought processes is an important aspect of the skeptic's detachment from himself." ((1983), p. 131) Indeed, as Burnyeat

further remarks, "The life without belief is not an achievement of the will but a paralysis of reason by itself" (*ibid.* p. 133). To the extent that he rejects the passivity of the Pyrrhonist, which Nietzsche views as adopting, albeit undogmatically, the prosaic conventions of society – essentially characteristic of "the herd" – Nietzsche would agree with Burnyeat. Yet, as we will now see, the basis for that rejection is quite distinct from that which Burnyeat suggests.

V. CAN – AND SHOULD – THE SKEPTIC LIVE HIS SKEPTICISM?

Traditionally, radical skepticism was charged with being untenable, or even incoherent, as a way of life. The objection is an obvious one, and arises frequently in the ancient literature; numerous stories are extant about Pyrrho being saved from danger by his friends. In a related example, found in Diogenes Laertius, Pyrrho is said to have been frightened by a dog, thus apparently abandoning his fundamental principle of indifference. (Pyrrho is reported to have responded, laconically, "it is not easy entirely to strip oneself of human weakness" ((1925), p. 479). The best known version of this response to skepticism is probably that found in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, where Cleanthes observes:

> Whether your skepticism be as absolute and sincere as you pretend, we shall learn by and by, when the company breaks up; we shall then see whether you go out at the door or the window, and whether you really doubt if your body has gravity or can be injured by its fall ... And this consideration ... may, I think, fairly serve to abate our ill-will to this humorous sect of skeptics ((1980), p. 5).

More recently, the issue of whether the life recommended by Pyrrhonic skepticism is in fact a livable life has

been the focus of a debate of considerable sophistication, carried out by Myles Burnyeat, Jonathan Barnes, and Michael Frede, among others. Burnyeat argues that a consistent life of skepticism becomes incoherent by requiring a separation from oneself, where one's first-order beliefs are assented to on the basis of second-order beliefs, where the assent to the latter is then "detached" from the person itself.

> He [the skeptic] is saying, in effect, "It is thought within me that *p*, but *I* do not believe it." In the right circumstances, that could be said. But not all the time, for every appearance/thought one has ((1983), p. 140).

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life is concerned, the Skeptic will be hard to distinguish from the common man (Mates (1996), p. 70). If this is the case, it is hard to imagine a form of life more repugnant to Nietzsche.

A further remark by Frede will help make quite clear Nietzsche's response to this issue:

> We know of only one successor of Sextus in the third century, Saturninus. ... The temptation [i.e. the need for "access" to reality *via* true belief] had become too great: if mere reason could not lead us to the truth we need for our salvation and beatitude, it would require cleansed, purified, and illuminated reason, perhaps even reason in the light of some revelation; but whatever it takes, we must have the real truth if our lives are not to fail (Frede (1987), p. 199).

Nietzsche's critique of scientism, of slave morality in general, of Christian morality in specific, of asceticism, of philosophical "laboring," of passive nihilism, and the vast number of other views he rejects is grounded in the denial of the conception of truth Frede alludes to here. The point is summarized in *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

> These Nay-sayers and outsiders of today who are unconditional on one point – their insistence on intellectual cleanliness, these hard, severe, abstinent heroic spirits who constitute the honor of our age: all these pale atheists, anti-Christians, immoralists, nihilists, ephectics, *hectics* of the spirit ... they certainly believe they are as completely liberated from the ascetic ideal as possible, these "free, *very* free spirits"... They are far from being *free* spirits: for they still have faith in the truth (III. § 24).

It is well worth noting that in § 9 of this same essay, Nietzsche characterizes one with an "ephectic" disposition as one who suspends judgement – of course, that conception so fundamental to the Pyrrhonist approach. One sees Nietzsche's

radically opposed view throughout his work, encapsulated at *WM*, § 534: "The criterion of truth resides in the enhancement of the feeling of power." Without pursuing the complex details of Nietzsche's views on truth, logic, and metaphysical claims about the real, we can here at least see him reject, as a standard of evaluation and as a goal, that alleged philosophical *desideratum*, truth, shared in some sense by both the Pyrrhonists and Descartes, as well as post-Cartesian philosophers concerned with skepticism. While the Pyrrhonists seek to suspend inquiry into such truths, and the Cartesians seek to establish them by defeating skepticism, Nietzsche sees both, albeit in different ways, as committed to the asceticism that adopts this fundamental constraint, a constraint from which he wishes to break free and which he wishes to abandon.[11]

We can now see not only Nietzsche's *response* to the question of whether living the skeptic's life is possible, we can see that he has changed the very terms in which the question should be treated. For Nietzsche, the question whether or not the skeptic *can* live her skepticism, insofar as such a capacity is grounded in any metaphysically real conception of truth[12] be-

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[11] The relationship between Nietzsche's views on truth, logic, and the claims of metaphysics raises issues that go well beyond the scope of the present discussion. For a development of these views, the discussions by Schacht (1983), Grimm (1977), Clark (1990), and Poellner (1995) are all very informative and suggestive. Again, I have not tried to take into consideration the vast literature, often labelled "post-modern," that provides an entirely different perspective on the questions addressed here.

[12] Clarke has argued that in Nietzsche's mature work, he is committed to some sort of common-sense realism, although he consistently rejects "metaphysical realism." Poellner (1995), pp. 22-25 has criticized her account on various grounds. Yet, as Poellner notes in his concluding chapter, Nietzsche is faced with the possibly crippling

comes, more or less, irrelevant. The much more pressing issue is whether the skeptic *should* live her skepticism, and what form that life will take. In more general terms, we can see then why Nietzsche claims:

> Thus the question "Why science?" leads back to the moral problem: *Why have morality at all* when life, nature, and history are "not moral"? No doubt, those who are truthful in that audacious and ultimate sense that is presupposed by the faith in science *thus affirm another world* than the world of life, nature, and history... it is still a *metaphysical faith* upon which our faith in science rests (*FW*, § 344).

Rather than inquiring solely along metaphysical or epistemological lines, Nietzsche transforms the question fundamentally into a *normative* investigation and critique, concluding that a skepticism that rests content with custom and convention is as impoverished, "cold," "Buddhist," and life-denying as other, more familiar, versions of asceticism and slave morality. If the reports from Diogenes (and Sextus) are at all accurate, the questions of being able consistently to live one's skepticism *minimally* requires submitting to social custom and convention, as well as depending on others for one's own survival – perhaps only Pyrrho himself, on anecdotal evidence, sought to dismiss even these constraints. In any case, the requirements Pyrrhonic doctine endorses are precisely those Nietzsche spent most of his adult life rejecting, albeit most obviously in his writing. Such conditions are the very denial of the will to power and, as such, explain Nietzsche's ultimate hostility toward the Pyrrhonists. As Nietzsche remarks in the *Nachlaß*, "it is the measure of strength to what extent we can

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problem of self-reference, a problem that may only be avoided by adopting the commitment to common-sense realism and a minimal, Tarski-style, criterion of truth Clark urges.

admit to ourselves, without perishing, the merely *apparent* character, the necessity of lies" (*WM*, § 15). But this admission does not entail succumbing to the enervating convention and tradition of one's community. Again, while Nietzsche admires the courage of the Pyrrhonist in rejecting dogmatism, he sees the Pyrrhonist response to that rejection as a failure of nerve, and as resulting in just another version of slave morality.

In contrast to the Pyrrhonist, the philosopher of the future neither submits to, nor remains content with, passive nihilism, but moves on to engage in *fröhliche Wissenschaft*. This would account for Nietzsche's often open hostility to skepticism as traditionally practiced, as well as such positive remarks as "great intellects are skeptics" (*A*, § 54). Without distinguishing the *kind* of skepticism Nietzsche has in mind, we can make no sense of what would otherwise be conflicting comments. At the same time, to remain satisfied solely with criticism is to fail to break out and go beyond nihilism – as the "new philosophers" will say, "critics are instruments of the philosopher and for that very reason, being instruments, a long way from being philosophers themselves" (*JGB*, § 210).

It is difficult to determine what precisely Nietzsche means by engaging in *fröhliche Wissenschaft* and one would think that this is Nietzsche's intent, in that such descriptions would invariably be reductive and constricting to just that "free spirit" he seeks to address. Generally he is satisfied to leave such characterizations general and open-ended:

> ... one could conceive of such a pleasure and power of self-determination, such a *freedom* of the will that the spirit would take leave of all faith and every wish for certainty, being practiced in maintaining himself on insubstantial ropes and possibilities and dancing even near abysses. Such a spirit would be the *free spirit* par excellence (*FW*, § 347).

Indeed, his characterization of such life-affirmation must be reconstructed out of the vast number of critical comments regarding what would *not* qualify – by now a familiar list: passivity, slave morality, asceticism, nihilism, conforming to the thought of "the herd," etc.. The life of the authentic "philosopher of the future" – "I write for a species of man that does not yet exist: for the 'masters of the earth'" (*WM*, § 958) – can perhaps only be shown in terms of those who have represented that ideal: Napoleon, Goethe, Alexander, Borgia. At best the view can be characterized in only the most general and metaphorical terms: fundamentally displaying the will to power, manifesting the discipline, the courage, the boldness, the creativity, and the audacity both to overcome the old and give birth to new goals, new hypotheses, and new "truths," to establish an aristocracy in the most noble sense:

> Behold, I teach you the overman. The overman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman *shall be* the meaning of the earth! (*Z*, Prologue, § 3).

In sum, Nietzsche – the philologist – wants to return to the etymological sense of *skeptikos*: searcher, inquirer, seeker, investigator. And this returns us to the poem "The Skeptics Speaks," briefly mentioned earlier:

> You have roamed long, and run
> and sought, and found not
> – why do you hesitate here?...
> why do you still search?
> Precisely this I seek: the reason why!"[13]

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[13] *FW*; this poem appears on p. 67 of Kaufmann's translation, which is amended here.

Nietzsche ignores the question *whether* the skeptic can live her skepticism in order to address what is, for him, a much more critical, and fundamentally normative, question. Thus whether one believes the skeptic's life is *livable* or not, in accordance with traditional criteria of consistency and epistemic or metaphysical conceivability, Nietzsche sees the Pyrrhonic solution as moral cowardice. While the Pyrrhonist points the way toward a life lived non-dogmatically, Nietzsche sees him as succumbing at the crucial point to simply another version of passive nihilism and life-denial. The bold, life-*affirming* skeptic of the future – Zarathustra, after all, is a skeptic – moves beyond this passive response to "give birth to a dancing star." It is this kind of skeptic Nietzsche describes in *On the Genealogy of Morals*: the "human being of the future" who:

> will redeem us not only from the hitherto reigning ideal but also from that which was bound to grow out of it, the great nausea, the will to nothingness, nihilism: this bell-stroke of noon and of the great decision that liberates the will again and restores its goal to the earth and his hope to man: this Antichrist and antinihilist: this victor over God and nothingness – *he must come one day* – (II, § 24).

To conclude, we can look briefly at one final question: is Nietzsche himself a skeptic? As Poellner has correctly noted, there is "a pervasive sceptical strand of thought" in Nietzsche's mature work ((1995), p. 11). At the same time, he rejects the conception of truth that makes Cartesian methodological skepticism (as well as the earlier, all-embracing Pyrrhonic skepticism) even possible. While he admires the approach of Pyrrhonists, and their courage in suspending judgement relative to all dogmatic claims, Nietzsche is harshly critical of what he sees as their moral cowardice in passively adopting the customs

and conventions of society. Nietzsche's skepticism – if it qualifies *as* "skepticism" – is rather a method grounded precisely in the rejection of those conventions, seeking to ground genuine philosophical inquiry in courage, manifest in the will to power, and tested by one's embrace of eternal recurrence. Thus Nietzschean skepticism is a skepticism of the future, only for those brave enough to pursue questions in the face of likely futility while maintaining their commitment to *fröhliche Wissenschaft*. And so in the end, in answer to the question "Is Nietzsche a skeptic?" we get an answer that might be formulated especially to please the Pyrrhonic skeptic – yes and no:

> Formula of our happiness: a Yes, a No, a straight line, a goal.... (*Anti-Christ*, p. 1).[14]

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