The Skeptic’s Goal is Ataraxia
by Sextus Empiricus (~200 AD)
from *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Book I
translated by Benson Mates (1996)

4. What Skepticism Is

… *Epoché* is a state of the intellect on account of which we neither deny nor affirm anything. *Ataraxia* is an untroubled and tranquil condition of the soul. …

22. “I Withhold Assent”

We use “I withhold assent” as short for “I am unable to say which of the alternatives proposed I ought to believe and which I ought not believe,” indicating that the matters appear equal to us as regards credibility and incredibility. As to whether they are equal, we maintain no firm opinion, but we do state what appears to us to be the case about them when that appearance affects us. And withholding assent [*epoché*] is so called from the intellect’s being held back in such a way as neither to assert nor deny, because of the equipollence of the matters in question.

10. Do the Skeptics Deny Appearances?

Those who claim that the Skeptics deny appearances seem to me not to have heard what we say. For, as we stated above, we do not reject the things that lead us involuntarily to assent in accord with a passively received *phantasia*, and these are appearances. And when we question whether the external object is such as it appears, we grant that it does appear, and we are not raising a question about the appearance but rather about what is said about the appearance; this is different from raising a question about the appearance itself. For example, the honey appears to us to be sweet. This we grant, for we sense the sweetness. But whether it is sweet we question …

11. The Criterion of the Skeptic Way

… Thus nobody, I think, disputes about whether the external object appears this way or that, but rather about whether it is such as it appears to be.

12. What Is the Goal of Skepticism?

After these remarks, our next task is to explain the goal of the Skeptic Way. Now the goal or end is that for the sake of which everything is done or considered, while it, in turn, is not done or considered for the sake of anything else; or, it is the ultimate object of the desires. We always say that as regards belief the Skeptic’s goal is *ataraxia* [tranquility; freedom from worry], and that as regards things that are unavoidable it is having moderate *pathè* [emotions, passions]. For when the Skeptic set out to philosophize with the aim of assessing his *phantasai* [appearances] – that is, of determining which are true and which are false so as to achieve *ataraxia* – he landed in a controversy between positions of equal strength, and, being unable to resolve it, he suspended judgment. But while he was thus suspending judgment there followed by chance the sought-after *ataraxia* as regards belief.
For the person who believes that something is by nature good or bad is constantly upset; when he does not possess the things that seem to be good, he thinks he is being tormented by things that are by nature bad, and he chases after the things he supposes to be good; then, when he gets these, he falls into still more torments because of irrational and immoderate exultation, and, fearing any change, he does absolutely everything in order not to lose the things that seem to him good. But the person who takes no position as to what is by nature good or bad neither avoids nor pursues intensely. As a result, he achieves ataraxia.

Indeed, what happened to the Skeptic is just like what is told of Apelles the painter. For 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. We do not suppose, of course, that the Skeptic is wholly untroubled, but we do say that he is troubled only by things unavoidable. For we agree that sometimes he is cold and thirsty and has various feelings like those. But even in such cases, whereas ordinary people are affected by two circumstances – namely by the pathé themselves and not less by its seeming that these conditions are by nature bad – the Skeptic, by eliminating the additional belief that all these things are naturally bad, gets off more moderately here as well. Because of this we say that as regards belief the Skeptic’s goal is ataraxia, but in regard to things unavoidable it is having moderate pathé. But some notable Skeptics have added “suspension of judgment during investigations” to these.

A Tincture of Pyrrhonism
by David Hume
from Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding XII.3

The greater part of mankind are naturally apt to be affirmative and dogmatic in their opinions, and … they see objects only on one side and have no idea of any counterpoising argument … But could such dogmatic reasoners become sensible of the strange infirmities of human understanding, even in its most perfect state and when most accurate and cautious in its determinations, such a reflection would naturally inspire them with more modesty and reserve, and diminish their fond opinion of themselves and their prejudice against antagonists. … And if any of the learned are inclined … to haughtiness and obstinacy, a small tincture of Pyrrhonism might abate their pride by showing them that the few advantages which they may have attained over their fellows are but inconsiderable, if compared with the universal perplexity and confusion which is inherent in human nature. In general, there is a degree of doubt and caution and modesty which, in all kinds of scrutiny and decision, ought forever accompany a just reasoner.
A Happy Life is Joy in the Truth
selections from the works of Saint Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 AD)

From The Teacher (trans. Peter King)

Augustine [to student]: I commend your hesitation; it bespeaks a circumspect mind, and this is the greatest safeguard of tranquility. It’s extremely difficult not to be perturbed when things we were holding with easy and ready approval are undermined by contrary arguments and, as it were, are wrenched out of our hands. Accordingly, just as it is right to yield to arguments that have been thoroughly considered and scrutinized, so it is hazardous to regard what is unknown as known. There is a danger that when things we presume are going to stand firm and endure are regularly overturned, we fall into such a great hatred and mistrust of reason\(^1\) it seems that confidence should not even be had in the plain truth itself.

From Enchiridion (trans. Peter King)

I’m not going to try now to untie the knotty question that plagued the cleverist Academicians: whether the wise man ought to give his approval [to anything], lest he fall into error if he were to give his to approval to falsehoods as truths – since all things, the Academicians affirm, are either hidden or uncertain. Accordingly, I wrote Against the Academicians at the beginning of my conversion, so that the things they said in opposition wouldn’t be a hindrance to us upon entering [the Christian life]. The despair over finding the truth, despair that seemed to be strengthened by their arguments, surely had to be eradicated. Thus, with the Academicians, every error is thought to be a sin, which they maintain can only be avoided if all assent is suspended. They say that anyone who assents to uncertain things is in error, and they argue in clever but shameless debates that there is nothing certain in men’s sights, because of the indistinguishable likeness to falsehood—even if what seems to be so were perhaps true! With us, however, the just man lives by faith [Romans 1:17 ; Habakkuk 2:4] But if assent were taken away faith is taken away, since without assent, nothing is believed. And there are truths that, although they do not seem to be so, must be believed for anyone to be able to reach the happy life (which is eternal). I don’t know whether we should talk to those who don’t know … that they are alive at present … For nobody is allowed not to know that he is alive, seeing that he can’t even fail to know something if he isn’t alive! Failing to know, as well as knowing, are features of the living. But clearly by not assenting that they are alive, they seem to guard themselves against error, even though by being in error they are proven to be alive, since the one who is not alive cannot be in error. Therefore, just as it is not only true but also certain that we are alive, so are many things both true and certain to which we should not fail to give our assent, to merit the name ‘wisdom’ rather than ‘madness’!

\(^1\) … a clear reference to Plato’s discussion of ‘misology’ in Phaedo 89d-e.
From Revisions 1.1 (trans. Peter King)

Even before I was baptized, I first wrote Against the Academicians. Their arguments cause many people to despair of finding the truth. They forbid the wise man to assent to anything and to give his approval to anything whatsoever as clear and certain, since everything seems unclear and uncertain to them. Since these arguments were troubling me, I mean to rid my mind of them by the strongest reasoning I could. This was done with the Lord’s mercy and assistance.

From Against the Academicians (trans. Peter King)

Since we all want to be happy, we should carefully investigate whether that can happen only by finding the truth, or, putting all else aside if we want to be happy, by the diligent search for the truth.

From Confessions X.22-23 (trans. Albert Outler)

Now I ask all men whether they would rather rejoice in truth or in falsehood. They will no more hesitate to answer, “In truth,” than to say that they wish to be happy. For a happy life is joy in the truth. Yet this is joy in thee, who art the Truth, O God my Light, “the health of my countenance and my God.” (Psalm 42:11) All wish for this happy life; all wish for this life which is the only happy one: joy in the truth is what all men wish.

I have had experience with many who wished to deceive, but not one who wished to be deceived. Where, then, did they ever know about this happy life, except where they knew also what the truth is? For they love it, too, since they are not willing to be deceived. And when they love the happy life, which is nothing else but joy in the truth, then certainly they also love the truth. And yet they would not love it if there were not some knowledge of it in the memory.

Why, then, do they not rejoice in it? Why are they not happy? Because they are so fully preoccupied with other things which do more to make them miserable than those which would make them happy, which they remember so little about. Yet there is a little light in men. Let them walk—let them walk in it, lest the darkness overtake them.

Why, then, does truth generate hatred, and why does thy servant who preaches the truth come to be an enemy to them who also love the happy life, which is nothing else than joy in the truth—unless it be that truth is loved in such a way that those who love something else besides her wish that to be the truth which they do love. Since they are unwilling to be deceived, they are unwilling to be convinced that they have been deceived. Therefore, they hate the truth for the sake of whatever it is that they love in place of the truth. They love truth when she shines on them; and hate her when she rebukes them. And since they are not willing to be deceived, but do wish to deceive, they love truth when she reveals herself and hate her when she reveals them. On this account, she will so repay them that those who are unwilling to be exposed by her she will indeed expose against their will, and yet will not disclose herself to them.
Thus, truly thus: the human mind so blind and sick, so base and ill-mannered, desires to lie hidden, but does not wish that anything should be hidden from it. And yet the opposite is what happens—the mind itself is not hidden from the truth, but the truth is hidden from it. Yet even so, for all its wretchedness, it still prefers to rejoice in truth rather than in known falsehoods. It will, then, be happy only when without other distractions it comes to rejoice in that single Truth through which all things else are true.

… For there is a joy not granted to the wicked but only to those who worship thee thankfully—and this joy thou thyself art. The happy life is this—to rejoice to thee, in thee, and for thee. This it is and there is no other. But those who think there is another follow after other joys, and not the true one. But their will is still not moved except by some image or shadow of joy. …

_From City of God_ (trans. Marcus Dods)

And if some, with a vanity monstrous in proportion to its rarity, have become enamored of themselves because they can be stimulated and excited by no emotion, moved or bent by no affection, such persons rather lose all humanity than obtain true tranquility. For a thing is not necessarily right because it is inflexible, nor healthy because it is insensible. (14.9)

The peace of the body then consists in the duly proportioned arrangement of its parts. The peace of the irrational soul is the harmonious repose of the appetites, and that of the rational soul the harmony of knowledge and action. (19.13)

For as animals, by shunning pain, show that they love bodily peace, and, by pursuing pleasure to gratify their appetites, show that they love peace of soul, so their shrinking from death is a sufficient indication of their intense love of that peace which binds soul and body in close alliance. But, as man has a rational soul, he subordinates all this which he has in common with the beasts to the peace of his rational soul, that his intellect may have free play and may regulate his actions, and that he may thus enjoy the well-ordered harmony of knowledge and action which constitutes, as we have said, the peace of the rational soul. And for this purpose he must desire to be neither molested by pain, nor disturbed by desire, nor extinguished by death, that he may arrive at some useful knowledge by which he may regulate his life and manners. But, owing to the liability of the human mind to fall into mistakes, this very pursuit of knowledge may be a snare to him unless he has a divine Master, whom he may obey without misgiving, and who may at the same time give him such help as to preserve his own freedom. And because, so long as he is in this mortal body, he is a stranger to God, he walks by faith, not by sight; and he therefore refers all peace, bodily or spiritual or both, to that peace which mortal man has with the immortal God, so that he exhibits the well-ordered obedience of faith to eternal law. But as this divine Master inculcates two precepts — the love of God and the love of our neighbor — and as in these precepts a man finds three things he has to love — God, himself, and his neighbor — and that he who loves God loves himself thereby, it follows that he must endeavor to get his neighbor to love God, since he is ordered to love his neighbor as himself. He ought to make this endeavor in behalf of his wife, his children, his household, all within his reach, even as he would wish his neighbor to do the same for him if he needed it; and consequently he
will be at peace, or in well-ordered concord, with all men, as far as in him lies. And this is the order of this concord, that a man, in the first place, injure no one, and, in the second, do good to every one he can reach. (19.14)

As regards the uncertainty about everything which Varro alleges to be the differentiating characteristic of the New Academy, the city of God thoroughly detests such doubt as madness. Regarding matters which it apprehends by the mind and reason it has most absolute certainty, although its knowledge is limited because of the corruptible body pressing down the mind, for, as the apostle says, We know in part. (1 Corinthians 13:9) It believes also the evidence of the senses which the mind uses by aid of the body; for [if one who trusts his senses is sometimes deceived], he is more wretchedly deceived who fancies he should never trust them. It believes also the Holy Scriptures, old and new, which we call canonical, and which are the source of the faith by which the just lives (Habakkuk 2:4) and by which we walk without doubting while we are absent from the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:6) So long as this faith remains inviolate and firm, we may without blame entertain doubts regarding some things which we have neither perceived by sense nor by reason, and which have not been revealed to us by the canonical Scriptures, nor come to our knowledge through witnesses whom it is absurd to disbelieve. (19.18)

The Most Deplorable Condition Imaginable
from Treatise on Human Nature, I.IV
by David Hume (1739)

[from section 2] This skeptical doubt, both with respect to reason and the senses, is a malady which can never be radically cured, but must return upon us every moment, however we may chase it away … Carelessness and inattention alone can afford us any remedy. For this reason I rely entirely upon them, and take it for granted, whatever may be the reader’s opinion at this present moment, that an hour hence he will be persuaded there is both an external and internal world …

[from section 7] I find myself inclined to stop a moment in my present station, and to ponder that voyage which I have undertaken, and which undoubtedly requires the utmost art and industry to be brought to a happy conclusion. I think I am like a man who, having struck on many shoals, and having narrowly escaped shipwreck in passing a small firth, has yet the temerity to put out to sea in the same leaky weather-beaten vessel, and even carries his ambition so far as to think of compassing the globe under these disadvantageous circumstances. My memory of past errors and perplexities makes me diffident for the future. The wretched condition, weakness, and disorder of the faculties I must employ in my enquiries increase my apprehensions. And the impossibility of amending or correcting these faculties reduces me almost to despair, and makes me resolve to perish on the barren rock on which I am at present, rather than venture myself upon that boundless ocean, which runs out into immensity. This sudden view of my danger strikes me with melancholy; and as it is usual for that passion, above all others, to indulge itself; I cannot forbear feeding my despair with all those desponding reflections, which the present subject furnishes me with in such abundance.
I am first frightened and confounded with that forlorn solitude in which I am placed in my philosophy, and fancy myself some strange uncouth monster who, not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expelled all human commerce, and left utterly abandoned and disconsolate. ... When I look abroad, I foresee on every side dispute, contradiction, anger, calumny and detraction. When I turn my eye inward, I find nothing but doubt and ignorance. All the world conspires to oppose and contradict me; though such is my weakness that I feel all my opinions loosen and fall of themselves when unsupported by the approbation of others. Every step I take is with hesitation, and every new reflection makes me dread an error and absurdity in my reasoning.

For with what confidence can I venture upon such bold enterprises when, beside those numberless infirmities peculiar to myself, I find so many which are common to human nature? Can I be sure that in leaving all established opinions I am following truth? And by what criterion shall I distinguish her, even if fortune should at last guide me on her footsteps? ...

For my part, I know not what ought to be done in the present case. I can only observe what is commonly done; which is that this difficulty is seldom or never thought of; and even where it has once been present to the mind, is quickly forgot, and leaves but a small impression behind it. Very refined reflections have little or no influence upon us ...

But what have I here said, that reflections very refined and metaphysical have little or no influence upon us? This opinion I can scarce forbear retracting and condemning from my present feeling and experience. The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me and heated my brain that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favor shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? And on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environed with the deepest darkness, and utterly deprived of the use of every member and faculty.

Most fortunately it happens that, since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours’ amusement I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold and strained and ridiculous that I cannot find it in my heart to enter into them any further.

Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determined to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life. ... I am ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire, and resolve never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy. For those are my sentiments in that splenetic humor, which governs me at present.
I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my senses and understanding; and in this blind submission I show most perfectly my skeptical disposition and principles. But does it follow that I must strive against the current of nature which leads me to indolence and pleasure; that I must seclude myself in some measure from the commerce and society of men, which is so agreeable; and that I must torture my brains with subtleties and sophistries, at the very time that I cannot satisfy myself concerning the reasonableness of so painful an application, nor have any tolerable prospect of arriving by its means at truth and certainty. Under what obligation do I lie of making such an abuse of time? And to what end can it serve either for the service of mankind, or for my own private interest? No! If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe anything certainly are, my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable. Where I strive against my inclination, I shall have a good reason for my resistance; and will no more be led a-wandering into such dreary solitudes and rough passages as I have hitherto met with. …

At the time, therefore, that I am tired with amusement and company, and have indulged a reverie in my chamber, or in a solitary walk by a riverside, I feel my mind all collected within itself, and am naturally inclined to carry my view into all those subjects about which I have met with so many disputes in the course of my reading and conversation. I cannot forbear having a curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations which actuate and govern me. I am uneasy to think I approve of one object, and disapprove of another; call one thing beautiful, and another deformed; decide concerning truth and falsehood, reason and folly, without knowing upon what principles I proceed. I am concerned for the condition of the learned world, which lies under such deplorable ignorance in all these particulars. I feel an ambition to arise in me of contributing to the instruction of mankind, and of acquiring a name by my inventions and discoveries. These sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition; and should I endeavor to banish them by attaching myself to any other business or diversion, I feel I should be a loser in point of pleasure; and this is the origin of my philosophy.

If This is Wisdom, Let Me Be Deluded!
by Thomas Reid (1764)
from Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense V.VII

This opposition between philosophy and common sense is apt to have a very unhappy influence upon the philosopher himself. He sees human nature in an odd, unamiable, and mortifying light. He considers himself and the rest of his species as born under a necessity of believing ten thousand absurdities and contradictions, and endowed with such a pittance of reason as is just sufficient to make this unhappy discovery—and this is all the fruit of his profound speculations. Such notions of human nature tend to slacken every nerve of the soul, to put every noble purpose and sentiment out of countenance, and spread a melancholy gloom over the whole face of things.

If this is wisdom, let me be deluded with the vulgar!