

# Sextus Empiricus

Post by “Kalosyni” of November 4, 2022 at 9:40 AM

## Quote

"Sextus Empiricus was a Pyrrhonian Skeptic living probably in the second or third century CE, many of whose works survive, including the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, the best and fullest account we have of Pyrrhonian skepticism (a kind of skepticism named for Pyrrho (see entry on [Ancient Skepticism](#))). Pyrrhonian skepticism involves having no beliefs about philosophical, scientific, or theoretical matters—and according to some interpreters, no beliefs at all, period."

-- from [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

It looks like there is a possibility that Sextus Empiricus could be the possible source of the "Epicurean paradox" or "Epicurean dilemma". Doing a quick Google search you find it sometimes stated as some kind of fact that it was written by Epicurus. However, no extant writings of Epicurus contain this argument and it is possible that it has been misattributed to him.

"The “Epicurean paradox” is a version of the problem of evil. Lactantius attributes this trilemma to Epicurus in *De Ira Dei*:

"God, he says, either wishes to take away evils, and is unable; or He is able, and is unwilling; or He is neither willing nor able, or He is both willing and able. If He is willing and is unable, He is feeble, which is not in accordance with the character of God; if He is able and unwilling, He is envious, which is equally at variance with God; if He is neither willing nor able, He is both envious and feeble, and therefore not God; if He is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, from what source then are evils? Or why does He not remove them?"

**"Perhaps the earliest expression of the trilemma appears in the writings of the sceptic Sextus Empiricus (160–210 AD), who wrote in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*:**

"Further, this too should be said. Anyone who asserts that god exists either says that god takes care of the things in the cosmos or that he does not, and, if he does take care, that it is either of all things or of some. Now if he takes care of everything, there would be no particular evil thing and no evil in general in the cosmos; but the Dogmatists say that everything is full of evil; therefore god shall not be said to take care of everything. On the other hand, if he takes care of only some things, why does he take care of these and not of those? For either he wishes but is not able, or he is able but does not wish, or he neither wishes nor is able. If he both wished and

was able, he would have taken care of everything; but, for the reasons stated above, he does not take care of everything; therefore, it is not the case that he both wishes and is able to take care of everything. But if he wishes and is not able, he is weaker than the cause on account of which he is not able to take care of the things of which he does not take care; but it is contrary to the concept of god that he should be weaker than anything. Again, if he is able to take care of everything but does not wish to do so, he will be considered malevolent, and if he neither wishes nor is able, he is both malevolent and weak; but to say that about god is impious. Therefore, god does not take care of the things in the cosmos."

Source: [Lectures Bureau](#)

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### **Post by "Cassius" of November 4, 2022 at 10:03 AM**

Wow great find - thank you Kalosyni! I don't think I have ever seen that reference to Sextus Empiricus saying that before.

We've referred to that a lot on the forum in the past but I don't think linked it to Sextus Empiricus. It would be worth tracking down our prior discussions and adding this as a reference, and maybe even find a prior thread or starting a new one to highlight it.

This is worth exploring a lot further, post on facebook, etc.

I hope I am not forgetting but I do think this is the first time I have seen this.

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### **Post by "Eikadistes" of November 4, 2022 at 12:24 PM**

After some investigation, it seems that the original trilemma may have originated from the Skeptic Carneades in the 2nd-century BCE. This is proposed by Mark Larrimore in his introduction "Responding to Evils" in *The Problem of Evil: A Reader*. Oxford, Blackwell, 2001, pp. xviii-xxi. <<https://archive.org/details/proble...00unse/mode/2up>>

"It is customary to trace the trilemma to the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341-270 BCE). As the skeptical character Philo says in a much-quoted passage from David Hume's (1711-76) *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*,

*Epicurus'* old questions are yet unanswered.

Is he [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?

The source of 'Epicurus' old questions' is the early Christian theologian Lactantius' (240 to ca. 320) *The Wrath of God*, written around 313. From Lactantius' perspective, Epicurus was an atheist (and so he has been understood by Christians for centuries), but the Epicurean use of the trilemma is intended not to deny that there are gods, nor even that there is a god who is omnipotent and benevolent. It is a lesson about how to respond to evils. Epicurus clearly believed there were gods whose natures we could know. They are in fact neither willing nor able to prevent evil, but this is not because they are malevolent. It is because they (wisely) know better than to become involved with things. The Epicurean argument therefore doesn't stop at the difficulties with the Stoic (and later Christian) idea of a provident God, but goes on to articulate a view of the attitude of the gods to evils which we should emulate. The problem is not that the gods are not upset by evils, but that we *are*.

Was Epicurus in fact the originator of the questions? Lactantius wrote half a millennium after Epicurus, and the trilemma appears in no other fragments or discussions of Epicurus and the other two sources predate Lactantius. One reason to doubt whether the trilemma was actually formulated or used by Epicurus (although it may well have been used by later Epicureans) is that for the purpose just described, a trilemma is not an optimal means. A well-constructed trilemma doesn't conclusively show anything: it induces paralysis. Each one of its three intuitively credible statements is compatible with the others taken singly - but not together - so it cannot tell you which one(s) to give up. The form of the trilemma makes it more likely that the question was of ancient skeptic provenance, perhaps the work of Carneades (214-129 BCE). [See Reinhold Gleis, 'Et invidis et imbecillus, Das angebliche Epikurfragment bei Laktanz, De ira Dei 13, 20-21,' *Vigiliac Christianae*, 42 (1988), 47-58.] The trilemma was a form of argument perfected by the ancient skeptics.

It is in fact in Sextus Empiricus' manual of skepticism, the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (ca. 200 CE) that the oldest extant version of the trilemma appears [...] Sextus Empiricus' conclusion is that since 'whether god exists is not apprehensible,'

those who firmly maintain that god exists will be forced into impiety; for if they say that he takes care of everything, they will be saying that god is the cause of evils, while if they say that he takes care of some things only or even of nothing, they will be forced to say that he is either malevolent or weak, and manifestly these are impious conclusions. [*The Sceptic Way: Sextus Empiricus's outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. Benson Mates (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 175]

The goal of ancient skepticism is *ataraxia*, 'An untroubled or tranquil condition of the soul.' For the skeptic, the point of the trilemma is not that god is one way or the other - or not at all - but that in religious matters as in all others, it is best to avoid firmly maintaining anything.

The third ancient version of the argument is roughly contemporaneous with the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. It is the only version to make explicit reference to Christian beliefs."

If God is good . . . and has knowledge of the future, and also has power to avert evil, why did he suffer the man, deceived by the devil, to fall away from obedience to the law, and so to die? For the man was the image and likeness of God, or even God's substance, since from it the man's soul took its origin. So if, being good, he had wished a thing not to happen, and if, having foreknowledge, he had been aware that it would happen, and if he had had power and strength to prevent it from happening, that thing never would have happened which under these three conditions of divine majesty it was impossible should happen. but . . . as that did happen, the very opposite is proved, that God must be assumed to be neither good nor prescient nor omnipotent: because inasmuch as nothing of that sort could have happened if God had possessed these attributes of goodness and prescience and omnipotence, it follows that it did happen because God is devoid of these qualities. [Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), i. 97-9 (II.5). I am grateful to John G. Gager for this reference. See his 'Marcion and Philosophy,' *Vigiliac Christianae*, 26 (1972), 53-9.]"

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## Post by "Cassius" of November 4, 2022 at 1:17 PM

Thank you too Nate! The entire subject of Pyrrhonism (is *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* available today?) should be a topic of study for us. I feel confident that in that study we would learn a lot to the effect of why and how Epicurus rejected it, and that would really help give shape to what we do know from the remaining Epicurean texts.

Sort of like everyone today presumes Epicurus was the same as a modern atheist, most people seem to presume that he was a radical skeptic, and they kick back when confronted with the clear evidence to the contrary. It's the issue of whether anything is knowable, and where the line is in where we can have confidence in our knowledge.

Like Diogenes of Oinoanda said in Fragment 5:

### Quote

[Others do not] explicitly [stigmatise] natural science as unnecessary, being ashamed to acknowledge [this], but use another means of discarding it. For, when they assert that things are inapprehensible, what else are they saying than that there is no need for us to pursue natural science? After all, who will choose to seek what he can never find?

Now Aristotle and those who hold the same Peripatetic views as Aristotle say that nothing is scientifically knowable, because things are continually in flux and, on account of the rapidity of the flux, evade our apprehension. We on the other hand acknowledge their flux, but not its being so rapid that the nature of each thing [is] at no time apprehensible by sense-perception. And indeed [in no way would the upholders of] the view under discussion have been able to say (and this is just what they do [maintain] that [at one time] this is [white] and this black, while [at another time] neither this is [white nor] that black, [if] they had not had [previous] knowledge of the nature of both white and black.

Digging all this out would be a lot of work but very rewarding. To many this can seem like a side issue, but it really informs the whole Epicurean attitude toward life, to not give in to nihilism and despair at finding anything to be knowable, but to dig in with confidence after getting an understanding of "knowability" in the first place.