Module description (plus aims and objectives)

We are used to encounter ‘the sceptic’ as a hypothetical adversary to be overcome. The ancient world, however, presents us with a rich variety of philosophers who advanced their scepticism as a viable and, indeed, attractive way of life, as well as others who developed sophisticated critical responses to such scepticisms. In this module, we will explore these varieties of sceptical and anti-sceptical thought in the presocratic philosophers Xenophanes and Democritus, the towering Classical figures of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the Hellenistic schools of Academic and Pyrrhonian scepticism and, finally, in the anti-sceptical treatises of Augustine and Al-Ghazali. Among many other questions, we will ask whether the sceptic’s life can indeed be viable and attractive, how we should understand the nature and limits of justification, what strategies of argumentation the ancient sceptics and anti-sceptics developed, and how the later prominence of monotheistic theologies changed the terms of the debate.

Assessment methods and deadlines

- **Formative assessment**: A seminar presentation
- **Summative assessment**: 2 x 2,500-word essays
  - Due: May 14th 2015 at 4pm
Outline of lecture topics (plus suggested readings. Note: the Primary readings will be distributed in advance)

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<th>Week One: Forebears: Xenophanes and Democritus</th>
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<td>Suggested reading:</td>
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<td>• Primary (P):</td>
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<tr>
<td>o C.C.W. Taylor, <em>The Atomists: Leucippus and Democritus</em> (Toronto, 1999), pp. 8-13 (the fragments on epistemology, with facing English translation on odd pages), pp. 142-144 (no. 179a-d: the ancient sources for the fragments on epistemology).</td>
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<td>• Secondary (S):</td>
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<td>• Some further suggested reading (F):</td>
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<td>o J. Warren, <em>Presocratics</em> (Stockfield, 2007), chh. 3 (on Xenophanes) and 9 (on Democritus and Leucippus). (Helpful general introductions to Xenophanes and Democritus.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>o J.H. Lesher, <em>Xenophanes of Colophon</em> (Toronto, 1992), pp. 159-169 (‘Commentary on Fragment 34’).</td>
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<th>Week Two: Socrates and scepticism</th>
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<td>Suggested reading:</td>
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<td>• P:</td>
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<td>o Plato, <em>Apology</em></td>
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<td>• S:</td>
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<th>Week Three: Plato and scepticism</th>
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<td>• P:</td>
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<td>o Plato, <em>Theaetetus</em> 151e-172b.</td>
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<td>• S:</td>
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<td>• F:</td>
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<tr>
<td>o M.M. McCabe on knowledge in Plato, episode 23 of Peter Adamson’s <em>History of Philosophy Without any Gaps</em> (<a href="http://www.historyofphilosophy.net/">http://www.historyofphilosophy.net/</a>).</td>
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Outline of lecture topics (plus suggested readings)

**Week Four: Aristotle and scepticism**

Suggested reading:
- **P:**
  - Aristotle, *Metaphysics 4 (Gamma)* 3-6 (1005b19-1011b22).
  - Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 1.1-3 (71a1-73a20); 2.19 (99b15-100b17).
- **S:**
- **F:**

**Week Five: The sceptical Academy**

Suggested reading:
- **P:**
- **S:**
- **F:**

**Week Six: Early Pyrrhonism**

Suggested reading:
- **P:**
- **S:**
- **F:**

**Week Seven: Pyrrhonism in Sextus Empiricus I: belief, action and tranquillity**

Suggested reading:
- **P:**
- **S:**
Outline of lecture topics (plus suggested readings)

- **F:**

**Week Eight: Pyrrhonism in Sextus Empiricus II: the Modes of scepticism**

Suggested reading:
- **P:**
- **S:**
- **F:**

**Week Nine: Pyrrhonism in action: the arguments for and against god**

Suggested reading:
- **P:**
- **F:**

**Week Ten: Christian and Islamic perspectives: Augustine and Al-Ghazali**

Suggested reading:
- **P:**
  - Excerpts from Augustine’s *Against the Academicians* book 3 and a selection of other passages from Augustine, taken from P. King (ed. and trans.), *Augustine: Against the Academicians and The Teacher* (Indianapolis, 1995).
  - Al-Ghazali, *The Rescue from Error*, in *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings*, M. A. Khalidi (ed. and trans.) (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 59-64 (down to the end of ‘[88]’), pp. 76-86 (from ‘[130]’ down to the end of ‘[150]’).
- **S:**
- **F:**
Why does Xenophanes think that humans could not attain knowledge about some matters? Are all beliefs about those matters of equal weight in his view?

What was the place of sensory evidence in Democritus’ epistemology?

Why did the Academic sceptics claim Socrates as their philosophical ancestor? How farfetched was this claim?

Are there any ‘sceptical aspects’ to Plato’s philosophical methodology?

What are the continuities and the discontinuities between Protagorean relativism, as represented in Plato’s *Theaetetus*, and Pyrrhonian scepticism?

In what sense, if any, can we *argue* for the Principle of Non-Contradiction according to Aristotle?

Aristotle maintains that ‘not all knowledge is demonstrative.’ Does this view offer us a viable way of answering a sceptic who continues to demand *ad infinitum* that we justify our premisses?

Discuss critically Plato’s and/or Aristotle’s responses to Meno’s paradox.

Expound and assess Arcesilaus’ notion of ‘the reasonable’ (*to eulogon*) and/or Carneades’ notion of ‘the credible’ (*to pithanon*).

Is there any sense in which Pyrrho was a Pyrrhonist?

Can the sceptic live his scepticism? Discuss with reference to Sextus and/or the Academic sceptics.

How plausible is the idea that, by suspending judgement on whether anything is good or bad by nature, we will live a more tranquil life?

Expound and assess Sextus’ fourfold criterion of action.

What are the fundamental argumentative strategies of the Ten modes?

Either How strong are the arguments against the gods in Sextus? Or Which is the strongest argument against the gods in Sextus and why?

‘Monotheistic responses to scepticism prescribe above all a revised understanding of the relation between reasoning and authority.’ Discuss critically in relation to Augustine and/or Al-Ghazali.

Did Augustine refute the Academicians?

What brought on Al-Ghazali’s sceptical crisis? How did he overcome it?
Suggested additional readings

**NOTE:** the following list is meant to offer orientation and guidance for further possible avenues of research. The idea is not at all that students should strive to work through all or a large quantity of it!

**Translations of Sextus and Cicero’s *Academica:***
- R. Bett (trans.), *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Logicians* (Cambridge, 2005). (= Against the Mathematicians (M) 7-8)
- R. Bett (trans.), *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Physicists* (Cambridge, 2012). (= M 9-10)

For the Greek (but beware the generally dated and often unreliable translation), the most accessible complete edition of Sextus is still: R.G. Bury, *Sextus Empiricus*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1933–49). (vol. 1 = *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*; vol. 2 = M 7-8; vol. 3 = M 9-11; vol. 4 = M 1-6.)

**Collections and monographs:**
  


**Some comparative essays on ancient and later scepticism:**