It is a standing temptation for philosophers to find anticipations of their own views in the great thinkers of the past, but few have been so bold in the search for precursors, and so utterly mistaken, as Berkeley when he claimed Plato and Aristotle as allies to his immaterialist idealism. In *Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries Concerning the Virtues of Tar-Water*, which Berkeley published in his old age in 1744, he reviews the leading philosophies of antiquity and finds them on the whole a good deal more sympathetic to his own ideas than the "modern atheism," as he calls it, of Hobbes and Spinoza (§ 354) or the objectionable principles of "the mechanic and geometrical philosophers" such as Newton (§§ 250, 271). But his strongest and, I think, his most interesting claim is that neither Plato nor Aristotle admitted "an absolute actual existence of sensible or corporeal things" (§ 311).

This claim is interesting not because there is any truth in it, but precisely because it is so far off the mark that the question arises what made it possible for Berkeley to read Plato and Aristotle through the distorting lens of his own philosophy. That Berkeley misread certain texts is plain enough. But in explaining this I shall be aiming at larger questions about the whole climate of thought which encouraged or allowed the anachronistic misreading. For it was not due to a lack of scholarship or knowledge. Berkeley was extremely well versed in Greek philosophy, and *Siris* displays an enviable command of a wide range of the original texts. I shall argue, however, that none of those texts displays the leanings towards idealism which Berkeley thought he saw in them. Idealism, whether we mean by that Berkeley's own doctrine that *esse est percipi* or a more vaguely conceived thesis to the effect that everything is in some substantial sense mental or spiritual, is one of the very few major philosophical positions

* This paper (minus the bulk of Section IV) was delivered as a lecture to the Royal Institute of Philosophy in 1978, to be published in *Idealism: Past and Present*, Vol. 13 of Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, ed. G. Vesey.
which did not receive its first formulation in antiquity. This historical fact itself is interesting, if I can establish it, and one may suspect that the history of the nonexistence of idealism in antiquity will be connected with the history of what happened later to help Berkeley get it so wrong. There is thus a double tale to tell: it should teach us something about idealism and, more generally, about the relations between ancient and modern philosophy.

I

I begin, then, with the text that Berkeley had most especially in mind when making his claim that neither Plato nor Aristotle admitted “an absolute actual existence of sensible or corporeal things”:

In the Theaetetus we are told that if anyone saith a thing is, or is made, he must withal say, for what, or of what, or in respect of what, it is, or is made; for, that anything should exist in itself or absolutely is absurd. Agreeably to which doctrine it is also farther affirmed by Plato that it is impossible a thing should be sweet and sweet to nobody. [Siris § 311]

There follow some qualms and qualifications about attributing the same view to Aristotle, but when all is said and done Aristotle emerges with much the same position as Berkeley ascribes to Plato on the strength of the Theaetetus. So let us pause to see what that position is supposed to be.

“It is impossible a thing should be sweet and sweet to nobody”: that proposition is certainly to be found in the Theaetetus (160b, quoted below), along with much else that would be congenial to Berkeley’s taste. In the first part of the dialogue a theory is elaborated according to which nothing exists outside the particular perceptual encounter in which it appears to sense. If something is sweet, not only must it be sweet for someone to whom it

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appears sweet, but it cannot be or appear sweet to any other percipient or to the same percipient at another time (159e–160a). The instantiation of the sensible quality of sweetness is private (idion, 154a; cf. 161d, 166c) to a single perceiving subject on a single occasion, and it is of such fleetingly perceived, private occurrences that the whole sensible realm consists. No wonder Berkeley seized on this theory as an anticipation of his own account of the sensible world as a succession of ideas or momentary private appearances, each of which exhibits just those sensible qualities, and only those sensible qualities, which it appears to the perceiver to have. Indeed there is evidence in Siris that Berkeley simply identified the Theaetetus theory as just sketched with his own (cf. §§ 311, 347–49). But in this he made two mistakes, one as to the status of the theory in Plato’s dialogue, and one about its content. He was wrong in thinking that the theory gives the Platonic view of perception and the sensible world, and he was wrong in thinking that the theory is a version of his own immaterialist idealism. Of these two errors the important one for our purposes is the second, but it will be best to lead into it by a consideration of the first.

The propositions I cited from the Theaetetus occur in the course of a superbly elaborate argument designed to unravel the implications and commitments of Theaetetus’ definition (151e) of knowledge as perception. The theory which emerges is described as an attempt to make that definition hold good (183a; cf. 160e 1). The attempt comprises an epistemological component taken from Protagoras and an ontological component taken from Heraclitus, the two together being worked up into an account of the world and of our relation to it in perception on the strength of which it can be claimed that all perception is knowledge and all knowledge is perception. The finished theory states a complete set of sufficient conditions for Theaetetus’ definition to hold good. But since it is further suggested that this is the only set of sufficient conditions that could reasonably be devised, the sufficient conditions are also necessary conditions for the definition, inescapable commitments for anyone who purposes to equate knowledge with perception. It is then shown (160e ff.) that, when fully elaborated, the Protagorean-Heraclitean theory leads to multiple
absurdities, culminating in a proof (179c–183c) that if the theory were correct it would make language impossible.

Thus the structure of the argument is that of a *reductio ad absurdum*. The theorizing which attracted Berkeley represents not Plato’s belief, but his spelling out of the meaning and presuppositions of the initial thesis that knowledge is perception.² The theory cannot give Plato’s own view of perception and the sensible world if he thinks he has a good argument to show that it

² One reason Berkeley missed this is that he translated Theaetetus’ definition as “Sense is science,” taking the thesis of Theaetetus and Protagoras to be that sense alone suffices for knowing (understanding) the connections between things. Consequently he thought he could agree with Plato’s refutation of Theaetetus and Protagoras without ceasing to approve what he supposed to be Plato’s theory of perception and the flux of sensible things (§§ 253, 304–05). I discuss this aspect of Berkeley’s reading of the *Theaetetus* in “Aristotle on Understanding Knowledge,” in *Aristotle on Science: The ‘Posterior Analytics’*, ed. E. Berti (Padua: Antenore, 1981), pp. 97–139.

Failure to grasp that the argument is an extended *reductio ad absurdum* and that the theory of perception is not presented as Platonic doctrine is equally characteristic of modern commentators on the *Theaetetus*—although they have not Berkeley’s excuse of mistranslation to disassociate the definition from the theory which supports it. This is not the place for elaborate exegesis or scholarly controversy, but the case for the reading I present can be summarily set out in three stages, as follows.

(A) We first go through the text picking out the main stage-directions, as it were, by which Plato indicates how, in his view, the three theses under discussion (Theaetetus, Protagoras, Heraclitus) are related. This is best done *in abstracto*, without delving into the content of the theses themselves.

Most important, because centrally and emphatically placed at a turning point in the discussion, is 160de: the three theses “come to the same thing” [Th ↔ Prot ↔ Her], and more particularly (e 1), if Protagoras and Heraclitus are correct, perception is knowledge, as Theaetetus says [(Prot & Her) → Th]. Compare 183a, already cited: Heraclitus was brought in to make Theaetetus’ definition hold good [Her → Th]. Now go back to the beginning of the discussion at 151e–152a: Theaetetus and Protagoras say the same thing in different ways [Th ↔ Prot]—and then follows argument (152a–152c) to show that Protagoras makes Theaetetus’ definition come out right [Prot → Th]. Compare 164d: counterexamples to Theaetetus tell equally against Protagoras [Prot → Th]. Next, 152cd: Heraclitus gives the “real truth” behind Protagoras’ riddling statements [Prot ↔ Her]—and soon follows extended argument (153d ff.) to show that Protagoras requires a Heraclitean ontology [Prot → Her]. Compare 166b: Protagoras relies on Heraclitus to defend himself against an objection to Theaetetus’ definition [(Prot → Th) & (Prot → Her)]. Finally 183b: the refutation of Heraclitus demolishes Protagoras [Prot → Her] and disposes of Theaetetus’ definition [Th → Her]—unless Theaetetus can find some other method than Heraclitus’ to work out his equation of knowledge and perception. This terminal qualification to the mass of evidence just
makes language impossible. Indeed, the dialogue makes a point of emphasizing (182e) that the theory is itself a bit of language, so that if it were correct it could not even be coherently stated.

listed shows that there is a difference of status between the two halves of the equivalence we began from.

It is thought to be reasonably clear that

(1) Her → Prot → Th.

The work goes into showing

(2) Th → Prot → Her,

and then that both Protagoras and Heraclitus engender absurdity. (2) is hammered out step by step through the construction of the Protagorean-Heraclitean theory down to 160de. At each step the claim is that Theaetetus has no reasonable alternative if his definition is to be vindicated (for more detail on this characteristic feature of the dialectical method, see my papers “Examples in Epistemology: Socrates, Theaetetus and G. E. Moore,” Philosophy, 52 (1977), 381–98, and “Socratic Midwifery, Platonic Inspiration,” Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies, 24 (1977), 7–16). Consequently it remains an abstract possibility at the end that Theaetetus might find some alternative to (2) to avoid the reductio—a possibility which is, however, foreclosed by the direct refutation of the definition which follows at 184b–187a. In sum, the Protagorean-Heraclitean theory states a complete set of sufficient conditions for ‘Theaetetus’ definition to hold good, which conditions, it is argued, are (i) necessary conditions for it, (ii) harbingers of absurdity and hence, in the end, its downfall.

(B) If commentators have almost to a man been unwilling to take at face value these manifold indications by Plato as to the intended structure of his argument (and there are many lesser confirmatory signs which I have not mentioned), that is because they have not seen the underlying philosophical connections which make (2) intelligible and plausible. So the next task is to outline the connections in a manner which will enable us to take Plato at his word: see text below (it turns out that on this aspect Berkeley’s philosophical acumen scores better).

(C) Even so, even supposing that the account I shall sketch is found satisfactory, one major stumbling block will remain. To carry through the reductio it is necessary to remove the impression many readers have formed (most recently, John McDowell, Plato—Theaetetus (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), pp. 179–84, Robert Bolton, “Plato’s Distinction between Being and Becoming,” Review of Metaphysics, 29 (1975), 66–95) that what finally gets refuted at 179c–184b is a different and more extreme Heraclitean theory than that elaborated in the earlier section to 160e. The answer here is that Plato furnishes an argument (181de) to show that there is no escaping the further developments which are to be the theory’s undoing. And here too an appreciation of the underlying connections between the three theses is indispensable. For, unlike most commentators, I believe that this argument is to be taken seriously. But that is a large project which I must leave to another occasion. Our present need is to understand the theory, not destroy it.
But if Plato did not himself assent to the doctrine which Berkeley (not unfairly) formulates as a denial of "an absolute actual existence of sensible or corporeal things," it is reasonably certain that no one else did either. The elements of the theory come from Protagoras and Heraclitus, but there is every reason to doubt that either of these thinkers pushed the consequences of his views as far as Plato did. So, if there is a version of idealism to be discerned in the *Theaetetus*—and certainly, no other ancient text comes as near to Berkeley's position—it is not an idealism that any Greek thinker ever propounded as his own. It is a dialectical construction, which anticipates idealism only to show that it would entail the impossibility of language and other absurdities.

But is the *Theaetetus* theory a version of idealism? Do its resemblances with Berkeley, which are undeniable, include a resemblance in respect of the features which rank Berkeley as our first and foremost idealist? I take it that if the label "idealism" is of any historical use at all, it indicates a form of monism: monism not about the number of things in existence but about the number of kinds of things. Just as materialism is the monism which asserts that ultimately nothing exists or is real but matter and material things, so idealism is the monism which claims that ultimately all there is is mind and the contents of mind. But it is just this monistic tendency which is absent from the *Theaetetus*. To explain this I need to divulge some more details of Plato's dialectical construction.

The central contribution of Protagoras to the theory elaborated in the *Theaetetus* is the rule that whatever sensible appearances a person has, they are true for him—things really are, for him, as they appear to him to be—together with the converse rule that the only things that are real for him are those that appear to him. This is the content Plato gives to Protagoras' famous proclamation, "Man is the measure of all things, of those that are, that they are, and of those that are not, that they are not." The rule demands a state of affairs for every appearance, rendering that appearance true, and the converse rule demands for every state of affairs an appearance in which that state of affairs is perceived or known. Thus a thing appears white to me if and only if there
obtains the state of affairs, its being white for me. 3 If the rule and its converse are correct, Theaetetus’ definition is so far vindicated. Once perception is construed in Protagorean terms as the having of sensible appearances (152b 9–c 2), every perception will be the unerring apprehension of a particular state of affairs, and there will be no state of affairs which is not unerringly apprehended in perception. Thus all perception is knowledge, and all knowledge is perception. 4

But of course this will only work if the states of affairs are understood relativistically: what I know and perceive is what is the case for me now, at the time of perceiving it. The states of affairs which make the appearances true are such items as a thing’s being white to my eye now, and these states of affairs must be characterizable independently of what is the case for any other perceiver, including myself at another time, and indeed independently of what is the case for (what appears to) my other senses at the

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3 For a defense of the claim that Plato is serious about taking Protagoras’ Measure doctrine as a theory of truth and derives from it the above rule and its converse, see “Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato’s Theaetetus,” Philosophical Review, 85 (1976), 172–95.

4 That all perception is knowledge is explicitly and validly argued at 152ac from the rule that every appearance is true for the person who has it and the premise that perception is the same as having an appearance. That all knowledge is perception is not explicitly argued there, but it can be derived by application of the converse rule and it needs to be derived if Socrates is to prove that the whole equation of knowledge and perception follows from Protagoras’ philosophy. The reason for Plato’s silence here about the latter half of the package is, I think, the following: it is only where sensible qualities are concerned that one would venture to equate the having of appearances with perception—Socrates says as much at 152c 1–2—and Plato wants later (161b ff.) to discuss Protagorean relativism in its most general form, as the view that things are for each person as they appear to him, whether the “appearing” is appearing to sense or to thought. The completely general relativism will preserve the thesis that all perception is knowledge, while allowing for knowledge (veridical appearance) that is not perception. There is more to be said on this aspect (for some of it, see paper cited in the preceding note), but for present purposes it will be enough to amend our previous overall description of the argument: it is a reductio ad absurdum with asides, namely, those asides which treat of Protagorean relativism in a more general form than is required for sustaining Theaetetus’ definition. That said, we can from now on confine attention to sensible appearances and to one half of Theaetetus and Protagoras: the thesis that all perception is knowledge and the rule that, whatever sensible appearances a person has, they are true for him.
present time. The reason why this must be so is that, notoriously, appearances vary and conflict, and if they are all to be true for the person who has them, as the Protagorean rule prescribes, the states of affairs which make them true must vary to match. Similar considerations apply in Berkeley’s theory, for his notion of immediate perception embodies a version of the Protagorean rule: immediate perception for Berkeley is knowledge (Three Dialogues 206, 238); what is perceived must really be as it appears to be (Dial. 238); hence what is perceived must alter with every variation in the sensible appearances. The argument which yields this result is simple and compelling.

The same wind cannot be simultaneously both cold and not cold, to use Plato’s example, or in Berkeley’s version of the identical argument, the same water cannot be simultaneously both cold and warm (Dial. 178–79, 189). Hence, if every appearance is to be vindicated as true, as genuine knowledge, there will be a contradiction when appearances conflict, unless what is the case for the person or the hand that feels warm and what is the case for the one that feels cold constitute distinct and independent states of affairs. In Berkeleyan terms two distinct ideas are perceived, two momentary appearances which really do exhibit the qualities they seem to have; in Protagorean terms each perception confronts its own private instantiation of a sensible quality; and neither theory can allow that the same wind or the same water enters into both occurrences. And if this holds when the conflicting appearances are contemporaneous, it holds also when they come successively in the experience of one individual. Here too we need distinct states of affairs to match the appearances (for Berkeley, distinct ideas), and we must deny that the wind or the water maintains its identity through time to occur in both.6


6 The above summarizes a two-stage argument in the Theaetetus. Socrates first establishes the relativity of sensible qualities (153d–154b) and then develops its implications for the identity of objects (156a ff.). Already at stage one there are complications into which we should not enter here, but interestingly they are complications paralleled in Berkeley’s Three Dialogues, as I try to show in “Conflicting Appearances,” Proc. Brit. Acad. 65 (1979), 69–111.
But again, all this will only work if the world is very different from what we ordinarily take it to be. It must be a Heraclitean flux in which, for the reasons given, no two people perceive numerically the same item, and the items they do perceive cannot maintain a continuing identity from one moment to the next. Nothing is left but a succession of pairings between perceptual appearances on the one hand and the momentary states of affairs which they represent on the other. Just as Protagoras supplies the epistemology which is required if Theaetetus’ definition is to have a chance of survival (for the only perception which can invariably be relied upon to yield secure knowledge is what Berkeley was to call immediate perception), so Heraclitus gives the metaphysics of a world in which Protagoras’ epistemology holds good. With this too Berkeley will agree (Siris §§ 344, 348–49).

Such, in outline, are the underlying philosophical connections between the three theses on which the Theaetetus theory is built. It all sounds remarkably like Berkeley, not only in content but also in the argument which motivates and controls the construction. The difference is that in the Theaetetus it is as true to say that the perceiving subject is dependent on there being something for it to perceive as it is to say that the thing perceived is dependent on a subject perceiving it. The ontological dependence goes both ways. The clearest evidence of this is the very passage that Berkeley relies on in Siris when he claims, in the section I quoted, that Plato does not admit “an absolute actual existence of sensible or corporeal things.” Socrates is summing up the Protagorean-Heraclitean construction he has elaborated in support of Theaetetus’ definition:

Whenever I come to be perceiving, I necessarily come to be perceiving something; because it’s impossible to come to be perceiving, but not perceiving anything. And whenever it [sc., the object perceived] comes to be sweet, bitter, or anything of that kind, it necessarily comes to be so for someone; because it’s impossible to come to be sweet, but not sweet for anyone . . .

If “represent” here has to be construed differently for Berkeley and for Protagoras, that is part of the ontological divergence we are coming to.
Then what we're left with, I think, is that it's for each other we [sc., subject and object] are, if we are, or come to be, if we come to be, since necessity ties our being together, but doesn't tie it to anything else, or indeed to ourselves. So what we're left with is that we're tied to each other. It follows that, whether one uses 'be' or 'come to be' of something, one should speak of it as being, or coming to be, for someone or of something or in relation to something. As for speaking of a thing as being or coming to be anything just by itself, one shouldn't do that oneself, and one shouldn't accept it from anyone else either. That's what's indicated by the argument we've been setting out. [160ac, tr. McDowell]

In this symmetrical balance between subject and object of perception, between the appearances and the states of affairs which make them true, we have, I submit, a decisive contrast with Berkeley. In Berkeley, the object of perception is dependent on the perceiving subject, not vice versa; or if there is a dependence the other way as well, it does not carry the same weight of significance. To be sure, Berkeley insists that minds and ideas are radically different sorts of things (Principles of Human Knowledge §§ 2–3, Dial. 231). The being of an idea is its being perceived; the being of a mind is not. But while he says repeatedly that ideas are in the mind and cannot be conceived as existing apart from a mind which perceives them, because they cannot be conceived except as actually being perceived, he does not (in the published works) suggest the converse, as the Theaetetus does, that minds have an essential relation to ideas and cannot be conceived as existing apart from the ideas they perceive. The primacy goes to mind, not only because minds do more than perceive ideas—they

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8 This is the correct translation of gignesthai, which Berkeley (above, p. 4) rendered "is made."

9 The caveat is necessary on account of a surprising group of entries in Berkeley's unpublished Philosophical Commentaries headed by No. 577 (obelized for rejection): "The very existence of ideas constitutes the soul." This belongs with the early stages of Berkeley's philosophizing studied by A. A. Luce, The Dialectic of Immaterialism (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963). It is explicitly denied at Dial. 233.

10 No doubt the mind must have ideas to operate upon (cf. Phil. Comm. 478, Princ. §§ 27, 139, Dial., 231–34), but that is not enough for ontological dependence. Cf. Phil. Comm. 878: "Extension tho it exist only in the Mind, yet is no Property of the Mind, The Mind can exist without it tho it cannot without the Mind."
are also thinking, active things (Princ. § 27, Dial. 233, cf. 241)—but, more importantly, because in terms of the traditional metaphysical metaphor of support, it is minds which support ideas, not vice versa (Princ. § 91). Ideas have to inhere in a mind; minds do not have to inhere in anything.

This is connected, of course, with Berkeley’s belief that ideas, sensible things, are wholly inert; only minds have causal efficacy (Princ. §§ 25–26, Dial. 231). No idea would exist unless a mind brought it into existence and sustained it there. And Berkeley argues from this causal dependence to ontological dependence when he reasons that since in perception we are passively affected with ideas, these must be caused by another mind, namely God, and exist in that mind. “The mind [sc., the divine mind] contains all and acts all” is the way he phrases this double dependence in Siris (§ 295).

Now perception is passive in the Theaetetus also, but the causally active element is the thing perceived (159c). In truth, this is hardly a serious causal claim. The active item being just a momentary occurrence, it can be said to be active only in relation to the subject which perceives it here and now (157a, 160a). It has the power to stimulate a sense-organ or subject just once: it is active in relation to the equally momentary sense-organ or subject by which alone it is perceived and which perceives it alone (159e–160b). This activity is nothing but a last etiolated remnant of our ordinary assumptions about the causal role of physical objects in perception, left over when these have been whittled down to a series of distinct momentary occurrences. Plato’s dialectical construction is not seriously concerned with the causal aspect of perception. Nor does he trouble to explain, what for Berkeley is a major theme, how it comes about that there is always a state of affairs to match any given appearance. He has no equivalent to Berkeley’s divine agency. And his indifference to the issue of causality itself illustrates his lack of concern to award ontological primacy to one side or the other. For his dialectical purpose he can continue to work with the ordinary dualism of perceiving minds and physical objects perceived. The whittled-down physical objects have indeed no “absolute actual existence”—they exist only for the subjects which perceive them—but they are not mental things: they are not made to exist by a
mind, and consequently do not exist in a mind in the sense which makes Berkeley's a monistic philosophy. Conversely, minds in the *Theaetetus* have no absolute actual existence either, something Berkeley could certainly not allow. There is no continuing subject of perception, any more than a continuing object of perception, but only a series of distinct subjects existing momentarily as, for example, the subject or the sense-organ which sees that white thing now.

One might sum up the difference this way: where Berkeley insists that for sensible things *esse* is strictly identical with *percipi*, Plato says simply that a sensible item *est* if and only if *percipitur*, and he leaves it at that. The etiolated remnants of the two realms of mind and matter are tied together by necessity, but they remain two, not one.

II

We have now explored in some detail Berkeley's best evidence for an ancient Greek idealism, and we have found it wanting. There is little need to dwell on Berkeley's attempt to claim a similar position for Aristotle. Berkeley quotes Aristotle as saying, "Sensible things, although they receive no change in themselves, do nevertheless in sick persons produce different sensations and not the same" (*Met.* 1063a37-b4), and he admits that such passages "would seem to imply a distinct and absolute existence of

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12 On this point the comparison is with Russell's position in *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912), p. 19, rather than with Berkeley's mature philosophy. See further "Plato on the Grammar of Perceiving," *Classical Quarterly*, 26 (1976), 29-51. Of course, having got thus far it is only a short step, as Russell found, to abolishing the subject-object distinction altogether. But the point is that the step is not taken in the *Theaetetus*. In any case, if one detects an idealist slant in the ostensibly neutral monism of modern philosophers who have pushed further, that has a lot to do with one's knowledge that, historically, the monism is reached by way of Berkeley and presupposes Berkeley's elimination of matter. It is Berkeley's previous elimination of matter which ensured that, when Hume cut out Berkeley's substantial mind, all he could be left with was perceptions.
the objects of sense” (§ 311). So they do, but Berkeley counters that the existence of sensible things when not perceived is for Aristotle merely potential, not actual (§ 312). Here he has simply misunderstood Aristotle’s doctrine that sensible qualities become actualized in perception. It is not the thesis that an apple is not actually or really red except when it is seen, but that it does not look red. The apple becomes actually red when it ripens; what is actualized in perception is not the redness but the capacity of that redness to act on or manifest itself to sight. Further, even if the sensible qualities of the apple were merely potential, the apple itself in the Aristotelian scheme of things is not to be identified with the sum of its sensible qualities. It is a substantial entity in its own right, which is to say that it enjoys exactly that absolute actual existence which Berkeley is so anxious to deny.

But if both Plato and Aristotle refuse to enlist in the idealist cause, who remains? Various names might be suggested. Parmenides? But the fragment (frag. 3) which was once believed, by Berkeley among others (Siris § 309), to say that to think and to be are one and the same is rather to be construed as saying, on the contrary, that it is one and the same thing which is there for us to think of and is there to be: thought requires an object, distinct from itself, and that object, Parmenides argues, must actually

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13 See De Anima II 5 and III 2. Berkeley overlooks Aristotle’s central claim (418a 3–6) that the sensible object must already be in actuality what, prior to the act of perception, the sentient subject is potentially. If the red apple’s redness is a potentiality as well as an actuality, this is a second potentiality, on a par with the potential knowledge of a man who has actually learned something but is not currently using his knowledge, not with the potentiality which precedes the learning. Berkeley also draws on Aristotle’s doctrine that actual knowledge and the thing known are one: “Whence it follows that the things are where the knowledge is, that is to say, in the mind” (Siris § 310). Aristotle’s own conclusion is, of course, not that at all: “It is not the stone which is in the soul but its form” (De An. 431b 29–a 1). At Met. 1010b 30–35 (which Berkeley should have seized on) the aisthēta that are conceded to depend for their existence on being perceived must be actualized sensible qualities (so Christopher Kirwan, Aristotle’s Metaphysics Γ, Δ, E (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), ad loc.), or else Aristotle will be slipping into the Megarian account of possibility which he disputes on this very issue in Met. Θ 3.

14 In stricter moods Aristotle would not allow that an apple, as opposed to an apple tree, is a proper substance. But this hardly affects the issue, and I choose the example as being Berkeley’s own (Princ. § 1).
exist. Gorgias? Gorgias argued that nothing exists, that if anything did exist we could have no knowledge of it, and that even if we did have knowledge of it we could not communicate that knowledge to anyone else. But to argue that nothing exists at all is presumably not to take an idealist stance, and in any case what Gorgias was serious about was not his outrageous conclusions but the demonstration that he could impose them on you by argumentative persuasions which you will be helpless to resist. Metrodorus of Chios? Metrodorus was a skeptically inclined follower of Democritus who is credited with the obscure pronouncement, “Everything exists that one might think of” (frag. 2). But an atomist, whatever else he may be, is at least some sort of materialist, not an idealist, and the obscure remark may rather be a version of the atomist doctrine that all possibilities are sooner or later realized somewhere in the universe. This would tie in with an argument that Metrodorus is reported to have used to establish the existence of an infinite number of worlds: it is as absurd that just one world should come to be in the infinite as that just one ear of corn should grow on a large plain.¹⁵

Perhaps, then, the Neoplatonists? They have been classified as idealists because they hold that the world proceeds from Intellect (Nous) and Soul. The problem is that whether this is in any interesting sense an idealist view depends on how the cosmic creation is conceived, and about that, as about so much else, Plotinus and his successors are notoriously obscure. Berkeley was content to cite evidence that “the Platonists” believe that all nature is alive, and is made and governed by an eternal mind.¹⁶ But that is hardly enough. Even if it can be said that in Neoplatonism the real, insofar as it is real, is in some sense spiritual,¹⁷ it remains that matter is not. What is most revealing about Neoplatonism is that the cosmic creation (a permanent, not a temporal process) is still conceived in the old Greek way as the operation of a formal principle on matter.

Matter for Plotinus is indeed not corporeal (Enneads II 4. 12. 34–38), for it is without any determination at all: it is the sheer negativity of not being, potentiality without a trace of actuality, darkness or privation, evil (II 4, II 5, I 8). But Plotinus is emphatic that this does not mean it is an empty name (II 4. 12. 23–24). One arrives at the notion of matter by stripping away all determinations, including extension, and what is left at the limit of analysis is the concept of that which is other than all actual determinate being (II 4. 13. 27–32). The Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation has it that through a series of stages this “other” is endowed with reality and form in the manner in which darkness is illuminated by light. If it can be said that matter, too, is initially made by Soul, this is in consequence of, and not identical with, the imposition of form. It is actual determinate being which is the product of emanation; the making of matter is rather to be compared to the way a beam of light marks out the darkness below as what is other than itself, as that which it illuminates and informs (I 8. 7. 17–24, II 4. 5). The old doctrine that everything in the world is a combination of matter and form still holds, though it has been complicated and reinterpreted in novel ways (II 4. 6, II 4. 10. 23–25). It seems, therefore, that the grand cosmic metaphor of emanation is evidence less of incipient idealism in a modern sense than of the ancients’ final inability to relinquish the traditional dualities of mind and object, subject and attribute. In fact, while it is not surprising that Berkeley should approve the denial that matter is corporeal (Siris §§ 306, 317–18), he is only able to embrace the full Neoplatonic doctrine that matter is not being, the darkness illumined by form (Siris §§ 318–20), by a striking relaxation of his own earlier contention that there is no nonmental “other” to mind because the notion of matter is just a confused fiction concocted by philosophers.

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18 ontōs ouk on (II 5. 5. 25), to be contrasted with that which is not at all (to pantē/panteles mé on, VI 9. 11. 36–38).

19 This inconsistency between Siris and the earlier Berkeley is well noted by Naguib Baladi, “Plotin et l’immatérialisme de Berkeley. Témoignage de la Siris,” in Atti del Convegno Internazionale sul tema: Plotino e il Neoplatonismo in Oriente e in Occidente (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Quaderno No. 198, 1974), pp. 597–602.
A full treatment of Neoplatonic "idealism" would have to grapple with the further difficulty that Intellect and Soul themselves proceed from an ineffable first principle, the One. It is possible that the One does in some obscure and unfamiliar sense have knowledge of itself.\textsuperscript{20} The interpretation is not uncontroversial, but supposing it to be well-founded, the motivation would probably be that it is only in an absolutely unitary and hence unitarily self-knowing first principle that the traditional duality of subject and object can be finally and completely overcome. But this means, first, that some form of duality remains at every other level; and second, that since both Intellect and its eternal intelligible objects (the Forms, which are different, yet not separate, from Intellect: III 9. 1) disappear together into the One, it would be misleading and partial to describe the ultimate monism as a monism of mind. Even less is it a monism of mind if the controversially anthropomorphic interpretation of the One is set aside. So our quarry is not to be found in Plotinus.\textsuperscript{21} As for the 800-odd years of Greek philosophy before Neoplatonism took over—and it is to this more congenial period that my generalizations will now be addressed—throughout that time thought and theory are dominated by an unquestioned, unquestioning assumption of realism.

Greek philosophy is perfectly prepared to think that reality may be entirely different from what we ordinarily take it to be. It may be distorted by our anthropocentric point of view and misrepresented by the conventional categories of our language, as Heraclitus held. Such fundamental features of our experience as plurality and change, time and motion, may be contradictory illusion, as the Eleatics contend. It may be that each of us lives in his own private reality, as Protagoras, had he seen as far as Plato, should have said. Or it may be, as Democritus suggests, that the only common objective reality is a colorless world of

\textsuperscript{20} For a recent discussion and advocacy of the view, see J. M. Rist, \textit{Plotinus: The Road to Reality} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), Ch. 4.

atoms and void, a world without any of the secondary qualities familiar to subjective experience. It may be, finally, that we simply know nothing of what reality is like, as various skeptics urge. But all these philosophers, however radical their scrutiny of ordinary belief, leave untouched—indeed, they rely upon—the notion that we are deceived or ignorant about something. There is a reality of some sort confronting us; we are in touch with something, even if this something, reality, is not at all what we think it to be. Greek philosophy does not know the problem of proving in a general way the existence of an external world. That problem is a modern invention, and the process by which it was invented will be highly germane to our enquiry later on. The problem which typifies ancient philosophical enquiry in a way that the external world problem has come to typify philosophical enquiry in modern times is quite the opposite. It is the problem of understanding how thought can be of nothing or what is not, how our minds can be exercised on falsehoods, fictions, and illusions. The characteristic worry, from Parmenides onwards, is not how the mind can be in touch with anything at all, but how it can fail to be. And I think that in this contrast there is much to be learned about the differences between ancient and modern philosophy.

For one thing, it means that the monism which comes most naturally to a Greek philosopher is materialism, as in the Stoics

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22 Objection: But Parmenides himself famously declares that the words mortals use, words like “come into being,” “changing place,” etc., are mere names (frag. 8, 38), i.e., empty names to which nothing corresponds. Answer: It is his editors who have made him say this. The authentic text, with much the best authority in the manuscripts, is not toi pant’ onom’ estai (“Wherefore all these are [sc., mere] names which mortals have laid down believing them to be true”), but toi pant’ onomastai. The latter was vigorously defended by Leonard Woodbury, “Parmenides on Names,” Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, 63 (1958), 145–60, with the translation “With reference to it [sc., that-which-is] all the names given that mortal men have instituted, in the belief that they were true.” But his defense has remained open to a technical grammatical objection (see G. E. L. Owen in Studies in Presocratic Philosophy, Vol. II, ed. R. E. Allen and D. J. Furley (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, New York: Humanities Press, 1975), 69). A simple solution will circumvent the difficulty: keep toi as “wherefore” and take the subject of the verb from to eon in the previous line (construction as in frag. 9, 1): “Wherefore it (the one being) is named all the names which mortals have laid down in the (mistaken) belief that they are true (of it).” On this construal mortals continue to talk about something, viz., the only thing there is to talk about, but what they say about it is wrong and contradictory.
or, very differently and provided that an infinite void does not count as an extra item in one's ontology, Democritean and Epicurean atomism. These philosophies reduce mind to matter with a robust paucity of argument which ought to strike the historian as revealingly naive. Whereas, I suggest, a monism leaning in the other direction, from reality to mind, would be repellent to Greek thought, for it would seem to deprive the mind of the objects it must necessarily have. This inbuilt assumption of realism is well illustrated by a curious passage in Plato's *Parmenides* (132bc).

In reply to the famous Third Man Argument against the Platonic Theory of Forms, Socrates makes the suggestion that the Forms are thoughts. This would mean, he says, that a Form could not subsist anywhere but in souls, and in that way each Form would be one and would not suffer the damaging reduplication which the Third Man Argument brought about. To understand this suggestion we need to remember that Plato's Forms, at least in the context of the arguments in the *Parmenides*, are entities which explain how it is that a number of things are, for example, large. Socrates' answer so far has been that large things all participate in the Form, the Large Itself, which is an independent entity grasped by reasoning rather than by perception (cf. 129a–130a). But this answer has led to various absurdities, the last and most serious of which—the Third Man objection—was that the very reasoning which favors the postulation of a single Form, the Large Itself, further gives rise to an infinite number of Forms for the things that are large; and this wrecks the hypothesis, on which the explanatory force of the theory depends, that there is just one Form for each set of things falling under the common term in question. Socrates' escape from the difficulty, as I understand it, involves the suggestion that in a certain sense there is no independently existing entity, the Form, at all, and hence nothing that could turn out to be many instead of one. Large things are large, not because they all have a relationship to a further entity, the Form, but because they are all related, in some way as yet unspecified, to a certain thought. That thought, therefore, is the Form which explains how it is that all of them are large.

Now, given that the purpose of the Theory of Forms is to explain how it is that things in the world have the characters they
do, it might seem that the proposal to construe Forms as thoughts, subsisting only in souls or minds, was a move toward a form of idealism different from the Berkeleyan kind we have chiefly considered so far. The idealism which has been most influential in modern times is the idealism which asserts, in one version or another, that the world is essentially structured by the categories of our thought. And it might well seem that some such dependence of the characters of things on thought was the solution Socrates has proposed to escape the difficulties he encountered with his earlier, heavily realist mode of explanation.

But consider how the argument develops. Parmenides asks, “Is each of the thoughts one and yet a thought of nothing?” “Impossible,” replies Socrates. “So it is a thought of something?” “Yes.” “Of something that is or of something that is not?” “Of something that is.” “Of some one thing which, being over all the cases, that thought thinks, i.e., some single character?” “Yes.” “Then won’t this thing, which is thought to be one [or: this one object of thought] and which is always the same over all the cases, be a Form?” “That again seems to follow.” Thus Socrates is driven back to his original realism. Thought must have an object, a really existing object independent of itself, and that object will be the Form.

What is remarkable about this argument is its swiftness and the brutality of its realism. Plato is certainly capable of more sophisticated treatment of the relation of thought to its objects. Here he is indulging an Eleatic theme which he knows very well needs careful scrutiny lest it trap one in intolerable paradox. But the very fact that he allows his Eleatic spokesman to get away with it reveals, I think, that it simply did not occur to him that there might be a serious philosophical thesis to be developed out of Socrates’ suggestion that Forms are thoughts. We are confronted with the spectacle of the most audacious and creative philosophical imagination of antiquity (witness, to take just one example, the anticipatory refutation of Berkeley in the Theaetetus) unable to entertain seriously the idea that one might seek to explain the nature of the world by reference to the categories of our thought. He is unable to do so because, whatever his scruples about the Eleatic principle that there is no thinking of what is
not, he cannot see past the idea that thought must be of something independent of itself. Thought is relative, essentially of something else, and therefore it is incapable of furnishing the ultimate explanation of anything.

It is no objection to my taking this passage of the Parmenides as indicative of the deep hold of realism on Greek philosophy that in Hellenistic times the standard explanation of general terms, common to both Stoics and Epicureans, was a conceptualist one. General terms are associated with concepts (ennoiai) or mental dispositions, and no Hellenistic philosopher upholds a realist view of universals. This is no objection to what I have been saying, because the corollary of Hellenistic conceptualism is a naturalistic account of concept formation. It is our nature and our experience of the world that explain the concepts we have, not the other way round. The world is as it is independently of us, and shapes our thought accordingly. Whereas what Plato was gunning for in the Parmenides is not conceptualism about universals (though scholars often call it that), but the suggestion that it is thought which explains the way things are in the world. This is plain from the final twist in Parmenides' refutation, the most curious of all.

If Forms are thoughts, he argues, then the things which participate in them will themselves consist of thoughts, so that either they all think, or (an alternative absurdity) they are thoughts which nevertheless do not think. To find any sense at all in this nonsense we need to recognize that it makes use of a central contention of the Theory of Forms, that the characters of things are derived or borrowed from the characters of the corresponding Forms; so here the thought-character of Socrates' proposed Forms

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23 Cf. Klaus Oehler, Die Lehre vom Noetischen und Dianoetischen Denken bei Platon und Aristoteles (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1962), pp. 103 ff., who sees the connection between the nonidealism of the Parmenides and some of the differences between ancient and modern skepticism discussed below. In the Sophist Plato defuses the Eleatic principle precisely by showing that to think or speak of what is not is not to think or speak of nothing. That the something thought is independent of thought is the point which, in its several ramifications, also falsifies Hegel's claim to find anticipations of his own brand of idealism in Plato and Aristotle: Lectures on the History of Philosophy, tr. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, New York: Humanities Press, 1955), Vol. II, pp. 1, 43, 188, 196.
transfers to the things these Forms are to explain. Never mind whether Parmenides’ argument plays fair with the pattern of explanation preferred by the Theory of Forms. The important point for our purpose is that Plato is concerned with the explanatory, not just the classificatory function of Forms. And Hellenistic conceptualism would agree with him that it would be reversing the natural order of things to explain the world by the categories of our thought.

III

In these last remarks I have strayed into talking about developments in Hellenistic philosophy, and it is now time to move on to the later period and pick up the question I touched on earlier, why the Greeks never posed the problem of the existence of an external world in the general form we have known it since Descartes. This is the period in which to look for an answer to that question, because it was then that the arguments from conflicting appearances which we discussed in connection with Berkeley and the Theaetetus were worked up into a systematic skepticism. The legacy of Protagoras and Heraclitus was a battery of arguments tending to show that we have no knowledge of anything whatsoever, indeed that we have no grounds for reasonable belief. No matter what the question, there is no reason to believe any answer rather than its denial.

This is the position of Pyrrhonian skepticism as represented by Sextus Empiricus. The strategy for inducing a total suspension of judgment may be outlined as follows. We start, as skeptics so often do start, from the point that in any matter things appear differently to people in different situations or with different bodily constitutions or in different states of mind or in different cultures, and so on through an immense catalogue of varying

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24 For an assessment which answers that it does play fair, see David Keyt, “The Mad Craftsman of the Timaeus,” Philosophical Review, 80 (1971), 230–35.
circumstances and of the conflicting appearances to which they give rise. Faced with this conflict of appearances, the skeptic agrees with Berkeley and the *Theaetetus* that conflicting appearances cannot be equally true of a common objective world, cannot be equally representative of how things really are in themselves. Unlike Berkeley and the *Theaetetus*, however, the skeptic has no prior commitment to the thesis that perception or appearance is knowledge. So he does not accept both of a pair of conflicting appearances and then adjust his picture of the world to match. Rather, he holds on to the ordinary conception of a common objective world and looks for a criterion of truth to determine which of the conflicting appearances he should accept. Unfortunately, there turns out to be no intellectually satisfactory criterion he can trust and use. We have no adequate way of telling when things really are as they appear to be. The skeptic now finds himself in the following position: he cannot accept all the appearances, because they conflict, and he cannot decide between them, for lack of a criterion or any reasoned basis for preferring one to another. Hence he cannot accept any. He is forced to suspend judgment. Just try to believe something is true which you are fully aware that you have absolutely no reason to prefer to its denial; for instance, to take the favorite example, that the number of the stars is even. Pyrrhonian skepticism leaves you that way as regards every question whatsoever.

You may think this an uncomfortable position to end up in. But the skeptic does not find it so. The great recommendation of Pyrrhonism is that suspension of judgment on all questions as to what is true and what is false results in tranquillity. Anxiety is due either to certainty or to uncertainty. Either one holds firm beliefs—value beliefs about what is important and worthwhile and factual beliefs about states of affairs in the world which bear on one’s pursuit or preservation of these goods—and then one is afflicted with hopes and fears for one’s present and future happiness; or, alternatively, one is made anxious by being uncertain whether one has the right beliefs about these things. The skeptic, we are told (*PH* I 12, 26–29), sets out on his enquiries in the hope of freeing himself from the anxieties of uncertainty. And he does get free of them—but in a manner different from that which he aimed for. He resolves his uncertainty, not by
finding answers to his questions (which would only be to swap one source of anxiety for another), but by finding that they seem to be unanswerable. It is when he throws in the sponge that, unexpec-
tedly, tranquillity ensues; just as, to use Sextus’ own comparison, the famous painter Apelles only achieved the effect of showing the foam at a horse’s mouth when he gave up trying and flung his sponge at the painting.

We may find this an unattractive solution to the problems of life. But we must recognize that Pyrrhonian skepticism had this in common with the rival Hellenistic philosophies, Stoicism and Epicureanism, that it offered in all seriousness a recipe for happiness. And it will become clear, I hope, that this practical orienta-
tion is of the first importance for the problem of the existence of the external world.²⁶ It goes without saying that a recipe for happiness is addressed to people who can live in the world and enjoy their happiness. I must now show that it did go without saying.

Sextus claims to suspend judgment about everything, but on examination we find that the scope of this “everything” does not extend to everything that we—that is, post-Cartesian we—would expect it to cover. The limitations are of several distinguishable types, and, significantly, not all of them are explicit in the skep-
tical literature. First, and this is something Sextus is entirely explicit about, the skeptic’s doubting and suspending judgment extends only to statements which make claims about how things are in themselves. Variants on this formulation include: how things are in their own nature, how things are in reality, what the external things are like, and (most simply) what is true. All these are what the skeptic suspends judgment about. He refrains from statements which make a truth claim about what is the case in a common objective world, external to ourselves and comprising things with a nature of their own. “Truth” in these contexts means truth as to real existence, something’s being true of an independent reality. It is in this sense that the skeptic will not assent to anything as true. But he will assent, indeed according to Sextus he cannot help assenting, to such appearances as he is affected with. He acknowledges feeling hot or thirsty; he does

²⁶ The connection was pointed out to me by David Owen.
not dispute that certain things customarily appear good or bad to him; he notes that certain arguments appear to lead to a skeptical conclusion; and so it goes for any subject you like to bring up. The skeptic finds himself assenting to a host of propositions of the form "Such and such appears to me now thus and so," but he never finds reason to advance to the truth claim "It is as it appears." There is thus a large class of statements which, as Sextus puts it (PH I 22), are immune from enquiry (αζήτητος). They are immune from enquiry, not open to dispute, because they make no claim as to objective fact. They simply record the skeptic's own present experience, the way he is affected (in Greek, his ἑρμηνεία), leaving it open whether external things really are as they appear to him to be.

That is the first limitation on the scope of Pyrrhonian skepticism, expressed in Sextus' own terms. The modern, post-Cartesian reader may feel that Sextus is somewhat disingenuous in offering this elucidation of what it is to suspend judgment about everything. But that would, I think, be a mistake. It would be a mistake for the same reason that it would be a mistake—though again a mistake that comes naturally to a post-Cartesian philosopher—to object that the skeptic has left himself some truth after all, namely, all those truths about his experience which he records in statements of the form "It appears to me thus and so." Surely, one wants to say, a statement of this form is true if and only if things do appear as the statement says they appear.27 But as I have already noted, in the skeptic's book to say that an appearance, or the statement expressing it, is true is to say that external things really are as they (are said to) appear to be. "True" in these discussions always means "true of a real objective world," and that is how the word "true" had been used since Protagoras and before. Protagoras' book was called Truth precisely because it offered an account of the conditions under which things really are as they appear to be. The Greek use of the predicates "true" and "false" embodies the assumption of realism on which I have been insisting all along. The correct response to this historical fact is not to object, but to ask for enlightenment: how did it come

about that philosophy accepted the idea that truth can be obtained without going outside subjective experience?

That question posed, let us turn to some of the limitations on which Sextus is less explicit. Never, for example, does he claim that the skeptic can be certain of "appearing"-statements or that he knows his own experiences. He does not, like some modern philosophers of a skeptical turn, say, "At least I know how things appear to me, but do I know any more than that?" And there is evidence in Galen that if the question was raised—and it is not clear that it was often raised—then at least the more radical Pyrrhonists (rustic Pyrrhonists, Galen calls them) would actually deny that they had certain knowledge of appearances.

It would be appropriate at this point to move a second request for enlightenment: when and why did philosophers first lay claim to knowledge of their own subjective states? But there is a complication. An earlier group of skeptics, the Cyrenaic school, did hold that we know our own experience (pathos) and nothing else. They put it in these terms: I know how I am being affected, but not what causes me to be thus affected. I can say, for example, "I am being burned" or "I am being cut," but not that it is fire that is burning or iron that is cutting me. If these examples are mystifying to a modern ear, it is not just for lack of the information that cutting and cauterizing were two main operations of ancient surgery. What one wants to ask is whether they mean the physical event of cauterizing or the way it feels. But to that question no answer is forthcoming.

Consider also the special vocabulary which the Cyrenaics devised to express their perceptual experiences. Instead of talking, as a latter-day skeptic would do, of seeming to see something

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28 PH I 215 is an apparent exception where Sextus is in fact reporting, and resisting, someone else’s attempt to assimilate Pyrrhonism to Cyrenaic skepticism, for which see below.


30 Aristocles apud Eusebius, Praeparatio Evangelica XIV 19, 1 = frag. 212 in Erich Mannebach, Aristippi et Cyrenaicorum Fragmenta (Leiden and Cologne: E. J. Brill, 1961); cf. frag. 214. The Cyrenaic theory of knowledge was developed by Aristippus the Younger in the second half of the fourth century B.C.

31 I am nevertheless grateful to Keith McCullough for drawing my attention to the relevance of the fact.

yellow and taste something sweet, or of something's appearing yellow, sweet, etc., the Cyrenaic prefers to say, "I am yellowed, sweetened, etc." The argument then is that if I am "yellowed," this does not guarantee that my yellowish state is due to something yellow outside me. I may have jaundice, which makes the eyes go yellow so that everything looks yellow. But now which of these, the yellowing of the eyes or the looking yellow, is the primary reference of the perceptual report "I am yellowed"? Once again, there is no clear answer. Moreover, there would be reason not to expect an answer if, as seems very possible, the Cyrenaic vocabulary derives from a skeptical reading of Aristotle's theory that to perceive yellow is to acquire the form which the object already has. For the ambiguity of this theory is precisely that it is unclear, and is still a matter of exegetical dispute, how literally (physically) Aristotle means to say that some part of me becomes yellow when I perceive yellow. But with or without this Aristotelian connection, it looks to be anachronistic to think we must be able to "split" the Cyrenaic notion of experience into separate mental (subjective) and physical (objective) components.

So far as I can discover, the first philosopher who picks out as something we know what are unambiguously subjective states, and picks them out as giving certain knowledge because they are subjective states, is Augustine (Contra Academicos III 26), in this as in other things a precursor of Descartes. It is clear that Augustine means to speak of subjective states, first because he uses verbs of appearance ("This appears white," "This tastes sweet," etc.), and second (in case anyone thinks to worry about a subjective reference for the demonstrative "this") because he has just invented the idea that we might designate as "the world" the totality of appearances, including the "as if" earth (quasi terra) and the "as if" sky which contains them (III 24). And Augustine

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33 This seems to be the earliest attested citing of the familiar philosophical myth about jaundice: see further my "Conflicting Appearances," op. cit.
34 Cf. n. 13 above. The suggested derivation is due to Keith McCullough.
35 E.g., De An. 425b 22–24: "That which sees has in a certain way become coloured; for in each case the sense organ is capable of receiving the sensible object without its matter."
36 The significance of this innovation of Augustine's as a step towards a Cartesian conception of the mind is well brought out by Gareth B. Matthews in a paper offering much that is relevant to our investigation: "Consciousness and Life," Philosophy, 52 (1977), 13–26.
thought of the claim to know items in this "world of appearance" not as a basis for skepticism, but as a novel way to refute the skeptical thesis that we have no knowledge of anything.

It is not very likely that the unclarity or ambiguity just noted in Cyrenaic skepticism is merely due to the poverty of our sources. For we find a parallel unclarity or ambiguity in Sextus' talk of external things. If we ask what these external things whose nature is in doubt are external to, it appears that no sharp line is drawn such as is presupposed in the modern formulation of the problem of the existence of the external world. In the modern formulation "external" means external to the mind, but in Sextus it means simply external to oneself, the cognitive subject, i.e., a man (cf. adv. Math. VII 167)—and the question is, "What does that come to?" Sextus can contrast the external thing with the bodily humors which affect one's perception of it (PH I 102) or with the medium through which it is perceived (ib. 124–27), so it seems plain that the line is not drawn in Cartesian fashion between the mind and everything else outside it, including the skeptic's own body.

By the same token "external" in Sextus' use of it imports no Cartesian (Augustinian) break between things outside and an inner (subjective) world of things apparent. Ask Sextus what he means when he claims to suspend judgment about everything, and he will typically reply, "Well, take honey: it appears sweet to me but bitter to people with jaundice, and there is no criterion for deciding which it really is. Likewise the tower appears round from a distance and square from close by. And so on. That's how it is with everything." It is one and the same external thing, honey or the tower, which appears thus and so and which has a real nature that the skeptic is unable to determine. To express his skepticism Sextus continues to use the ordinary linguistic framework of reference to common objects; the familiar common objects stay on as the logical subjects of his "appearing"-statements. Recalling Parmenides, one might put it this way: the skeptic's thinking and speaking, no less than that of his dogmatic opponents, is of something, and something that is. Of course, the skeptic is not Parmenides, and when pressed he will suspend judgment about whether these things exist to be referred to—but he is not anxious to push that point to its logical conclusion,
still less to generalize it as far as doubting whether anything exists to speak and think of at all. And I do not know a single text in Sextus which treats the skeptic’s own body as something external in the now familiar epistemological sense.

About the inside of human bodies, to be sure, Sextus is decidedly skeptical. Historically, Pyrrhonian skepticism had connections with certain skeptical movements in medicine.37 The Pyrrhonist arguments were used to oppose dogmatic trends in medicine which liked to theorize about the inner workings of the human body. But skepticism about one’s insides hardly settles the status of one’s body in the world at large. What does settle it is that Sextus is much exercised to combat an old objection to skepticism, an objection which goes back to the very beginnings of Greek skepticism and was to be important for Hume later: the objection, namely, that suspending judgment about everything must entail total inactivity and make life impossible.38 Not at all, replies Sextus. The skeptic will carry on acting like the rest of you, responding to the way things appear to him as nature and upbringing have conditioned him to respond. Now, whatever we may think of this rebuttal, it is not the language of a man afflicted with radical Cartesian doubt as to whether he has a body to act with and a world to act in at all. One’s own body has not yet become for philosophy a part of the external world.39 So another question for the historian to ask is: when and why did that happen?

Meanwhile, I suggest that the reason it does not occur to the Pyrrhonian skeptic to push his doubt that far is that he is still, like any other Hellenistic philosopher, a man in search of happiness. He has a practical concern. His skepticism is a solution to uncertainty about how to act in the world; or better, a dissolution of that uncertainty. Such being his prime concern, he cannot doubt in a completely general way his ability to act in the world.

37 Texts and historical discussion in Deichgräber, op. cit.
38 On Hume’s objection and Sextus’ reply, see paper cited n. 25 above.
39 Caution: Platonic soul-body dualism is not to the point here, since it puts no epistemological barrier between soul and body. The body is part of the material or sensible world, which is not at all the same as being part of “the external world” in the modern sense. That is one reason why Plato can vacillate over which “mental” functions belong properly to the soul and which to the body.
It is not that he affirms the world or the role of his body in it: these Cartesian questions lie apart from the route traveled by the skeptic’s inquiry, just because he is so serious, in a practical sense, about his skepticism. In that sense Descartes was very clear that his skeptical doubt was not serious (see below). It was a strictly methodological affair—in Bernard Williams’ phrase, “The Project of Pure Enquiry.” And that was what enabled him to take the doubt far enough to raise in absolutely general terms the problem of the existence of the external world.

I take it to be significant in this connection that the only ancient text I have been able to find which approaches within reach of a really general doubt is not from Sextus but from an opponent of Pyrrhonism, pursuing a line of argument which is designed to be deeply embarrassing to the skeptic. It is an argument used by Galen to defend scientific medicine against his Pyrrhonist rivals. Galen formulates the Pyrrhonists’ position as follows: about each of the things that appear they agree that it appears but they doubt, first, whether it really is as it appears, and second, whether it exists at all. By way of illustration we have a list of examples which is, I think, very much an opponent’s list, designed to embarrass, not the sort of example which is typical in Sextus. Thus, Galen says, according to the Pyrrhonists we do not know whether there is a sun or a moon, or earth or sea, or whether we are awake or even whether we are thinking or living; indeed, there is nothing in the sum total of things the nature of which we know—and here, given the context, it is further implied that there is nothing in the sum total of things the existence of which we know. Is this the generalized doubt we have been looking for? And at the same time, in the doubt about thinking and living, a hint of the materials for the Cartesian refutation of that doubt? Not quite, for see what Galen does with it. I’ll grant all this, he says, just to please them, but I have one little question to ask. When the sun appears plainly in the morning sky, do they expect us to stay in bed wondering whether it is really day and time to get on with things or still night? It is just the old objection about

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the skeptic being unable to act if he suspends judgment about everything. Not unlike Plato in the Parmenides, Galen remains blind to the potential implications of the hypothetical position he is formulating. For it is a hypothetical formulation, more explicitly extreme than you will find in the skeptic’s own literature. Like Plato’s hint at idealism, it is put up for a polemical purpose and then dropped after what, with hindsight, we are likely to consider totally inadequate exploration.

IV

It must be obvious by now that it is Descartes who holds the answer to the three questions thrown up by our survey of limitations, both expressed and unexpressed, in ancient Greek skepticism. To recapitulate, the questions were:

(1) How did it come about that philosophy accepted the idea that truth can be obtained without going outside subjective experience?

(2) When and why did philosophers first lay claim to knowledge of their own subjective states?

(3) When and why did one’s own body become for philosophy a part of the external world?

42 A couple of further texts should be mentioned here, if only that they may be discounted. (1) Xeniades of Corinth, a little-known figure of the fifth century B.C. said that everything, i.e., every appearance and opinion, is false (Sext. adv. Math. VII 53–54). Possibly what he meant by this was that nothing meets the Eleatic conditions for true being, since he also remarked that everything that comes to be comes to be from not being and everything that perishes perishes into not being. If so, the effective content of Xeniades’ claim would be that none of the things that come to be are really and truly what they appear to be (cf. Melissus frag. 8). But we have no knowledge of the wider context of these assertions. (2) Metrodorus of Chios was famous for having capped the skeptical denial that we know anything by further denying that we know whether we know anything or not (frag. 1), and then on top of that he says (in one source only: Cic. Acad. II 73) that we do not know whether anything exists or nothing. This, however, was the exordium to a work On Nature containing inter alia an atomist meteorology. It would seem, therefore, that for Metrodorus what we do not know we may nonetheless theorize about, and perhaps we may explain in terms of the atomic theory why we do not know it. I think we may be confident that if Xeniades, Metrodorus, or anyone else had come at all close to a genuinely Cartesian doubt, the skeptic doxography would have picked it up and told us loud and clear.
IDEALISM AND GREEK PHILOSOPHY

I mentioned Augustine in connection with (2), but, as with the Cogito, the Augustinian precedent does not amount to as much as one might expect. Augustine claims knowledge of his own subjective states, because they are subjective states, but he does not give that knowledge a privileged status. The claim sits side by side with the claim that he knows simple logical and mathematical truths (Contr. Acad. III 21, 23, 25, 29), to which his ancient skeptical opponents had a ready reply (e.g., Cicero, Academica II 91–98), and with the claim that the skeptic himself must surely know whether he is a man or an ant (Contr. Acad. III 22), from Descartes' point of view an equally unpromising line of attack (cf. HR I 150, 316–17). Whatever hints Augustine may have furnished, it was Descartes who put subjective knowledge at the center of epistemology—and thereby made idealism a possible position for a modern philosopher to take. I mean by this that it is not until someone brings the question “Is there anything other than mind?” into the center of philosophical attention that the replies to it—the affirmative reply of realism, and a fortiori the negative reply of idealism—will commend themselves as worthy of, and requiring, explicit defense. (What I have ascribed to antiquity is an unquestioned, unquestioning assumption of realism: something importantly different from an explicit philosophical thesis.) It remains to show that Descartes knew what he was doing, that he had a lively appreciation of the ways in which his thought transcended the limitations of the ancient tradition.

With reference to the First Meditation, Descartes wrote:

Nothing conduces more to the obtaining of a secure knowledge of reality than a previous accustoming of ourselves to entertain doubts especially about corporeal things; and although I had long ago seen several books written by the Academics about this subject and felt some disgust in warming over again that old cabbage, I could not for the above reasons refuse to allot to this subject one whole Meditation. [II Rep., HR II 31]

43 On Augustine and the Cogito, see Étienne Gilson, Études sur le rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien (Paris: J. Vrin, 1930), pp. 191–201.

44 References to Descartes are by volume and page number in The Philosophical Works of Descartes, corrected edn., ed. E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934).
The book(s) of the Academics must be Cicero's *Academica*, the main vehicle of information about the skepticism of the Academy under Arcesilaus and Carneades. The books of the Skeptics will then refer to people who call themselves skeptics, i.e., Pyrrhonists. The works of Sextus Empiric had become available to the modern world not quite a hundred years earlier and had been the focus of intense controversy ever since; whether or not Descartes had read Sextus, he would be acquainted with the writings of modern Pyrrhonists like Montaigne. So what the passage tells us is that the First *Meditation* is a rehash of ancient skepticism.

In what sense is this so? There are three levels of doubt in the dialectical to-and-fro of the First *Meditation*, each with its precedent in antiquity. At level one (HR I 145) Descartes argues that sense perception, since it is sometimes deceptive, cannot serve as a principle (in ancient terms, a criterion) for forming true beliefs. It is not, as sometimes supposed, the invalid argument that if some perceptions are actually false, all might possibly be false, but the altogether more defensible claim that a criterion of truth which plays you false is no criterion at all (like an algorithm which sometimes gives the wrong solution). In this form the argument goes back to Carneades (Cic. *Acad.* II 79–80, Sext. *adv. Math.* VII 159). Carneades' Stoic opponents made a point of insisting that the wise man (if you wish, the ideally reasonable man) suspends judgment, as Descartes is now doing, on anything dubious or uncertain (Cic. *Acad.* I 41–42, Sext. *adv. Math.* VII 155–57). The dispute between Academic and Stoic was then whether either sense or reason can supply a criterion for recognizing truth with unassailable certainty, in which case it is a perfectly proper first move to point out that sense perception as such will not serve, since the senses sometimes deceive.

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47 Further comparisons with Carneades in Pierre Couissin, "Carnéade et Descartes," in *Travaux du IXe Congrès International de Philosophie: Congrès Descartes*
This first move is met by an equally ancient distinction between favorable and unfavorable conditions of perception (e.g., Cic. Acad. II 19, 53). It is one thing to be doubtful about one’s view of minute or distant objects—in such unfavorable conditions it is indeed true that the senses sometimes deceive—another to query Descartes’ certainty about himself sitting by the fire in his winter cloak with paper in his hands. What is new here, what shows the more radical use Descartes is going to make of his skeptical reflections, is the example. Descartes’ own hands and body take over the center of the stage, first as an example of certainty and then, when that is challenged, as an example of something dubitable. For the next skeptical move brings up the idea that if madmen imagine that they have an earthenware head or are nothing but pumpkins or are made of glass, perhaps Descartes has no right to be certain that he does have the hands and body he takes himself to have. The appeal to the impressions had by madmen is common enough at the parallel point in ancient controversy (e.g., Cic. Acad. II 88–90, Sext. adv. Math. VII 61–63, 404–05), but so far as I know the examples never concern the insane person’s impression of his own body. Correspondingly, when Descartes objects that he would be no less insane himself were he to accept this line of reasoning, the objection is more telling where his own body is involved than it was in the less personally focused context of ancient debate (Cic. Acad. II 54).

It is Descartes’ own hands and body which again occupy his attention when he moves on to level two, the Dream doubt (HR I 145–46). This goes back to Plato’s Theaetetus (157e ff.), as Descartes was called upon to acknowledge (III Rep., HR II 60), but again Descartes makes a new and more radical use of it. In the Theaetetus the discussion remains at level one. The absence of a criterion for determining whether one is awake or dreaming supports only the conclusion that there is no rational basis for setting aside as false the impressions one has when dreaming, diseased, or insane. Every impression or appearance is true for the person who has it. Likewise in Sextus, dreams help to show

that the way things appear cannot be taken as the criterion for how they really are (e.g., PH I 104). The idea is that the credentials of dreams are no worse than those of waking experience. Descartes' conclusion from the same data is different and more general. It is that there is no rational basis for not setting aside as possibly false (suspending judgment about) any perceptual impression we ever have, including impressions of our own body. In other words, the credentials of (what we take to be) waking experience are no better than those of dreams. Possibly we have neither hands nor body such as we suppose we have. Any experience might be the illusion of a dream.

This is already a strikingly modern radicalization of doubt, but we have still to reach level three and the possibility of an all-powerful, deceiving deity (HR I 147 ff.), which Descartes himself characterized as a doubt additional to "the customary difficulties of the Sceptics." Cicero's Academica reports a number of the arguments which Academic skeptics used against the Stoics' theory that ordinary perceptual experience does supply a perfectly good criterion of truth, namely what they call the cataleptic impression, an impression which, being clear and distinct, gives a certain grasp of its object. Among these arguments is the following (Acad. II 47). Some impressions, it is agreed, are sent by the deity, through dreams, oracles, omens, and the like, and some of these god-sent impressions are convincing but false. If, then, the deity has the power to make false impressions convincing to us, he must have the power, equally, to make convincing to us impressions which are not only false but such that they can hardly be distinguished from those which are true; and if these, then also impressions such that the true and the false are wholly indistinguishable from one another. The argument is that the deity could so arrange things that even in the best possible perceptual situation and applying the greatest care and

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48 Descartes' Conversation with Burman, tr. John Cottingham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 4. It has been said that "it is not true . . . that Cartesian doubt is more radical than ancient scepticism" (Hiram Caton, The Origin of Subjectivity: An Essay on Descartes (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), p. 29)—this on the basis of a survey of some of our Protagorean and Pyrrhonian material. The Burman text shows that Descartes himself had a better understanding of his relation to the skeptical tradition.
attention, we could not distinguish the true from the false. Hence it is possible, contrary to Stoic theory, that even the most luminously clear and distinct perceptions are in fact false. But there the argument stops. The generalization which for us lies so readily to hand is not made. At no point is it suggested, as Descartes does suggest, that the malignant deity might have made every perception false (the whole totality), and every deliverance of our reasoning faculties false as well, so that we are deceived in everything. This is the "hyperbolical" doubt which alone poses in an absolutely general way the problem of the existence of the external world, where that, Descartes emphasizes once again (HR I 148), includes the existence of one's own body. If this is the result of Descartes' rehash of ancient skepticism, the implied claim is that the traditional material supports a doubt more radical than the traditional skeptic had dared suppose. So far as I can see, that claim is correct.

It is in any case important for Descartes that the claim should be correct. One of his subsidiary purposes depends on it. His primary purpose is, of course, to find truth for its own sake, but he also held, as a matter of history, that he was the first philosopher to refute the skeptics (VII Rep., HR II 336). And this historical claim depends on the strategy whereby the traditional skeptic's own specialty, excessive doubt, is pushed to the point where it brings us up against the truth of the Cogito. It is because the traditional skeptical materials support a doubt more radical than the traditional skeptic himself had dared suppose that they can be seen to lead, in the end, to a certainty which refutes the skepticism we began with. It is because the first truths Descartes establishes in the Second Meditation are truths reached by the

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49 This vital difference is overlooked by Léon Robin, Pyrrhon et le scepticisme grec (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1944), pp. 89–90, who claims that Carneades got as far as Descartes' evil demon doubt. Whether the evil demon was prompted, directly or indirectly, by the Academica is a separate issue about which I make no hypothesis. E. M. Curley, Descartes against the Skeptics (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), is well informed about the relations between Descartes and ancient skepticism, and he prefers to postulate a source in Montaigne (pp. 38–40, 68–69).

50 See Descartes' letter to Reneri for Pollot, April 1638, in Descartes: Philosophical Letters, tr. and ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 53: "Although the Pyrrhonians reached no certain conclusion from their doubts, it does not follow that no one can."
very method of doubt which is designed to call all truths into question, that they are immune to attack by the traditional skeptical devices and constitute a refutation, the first satisfactory and non-question-begging refutation, of the books of the Academics and Pyrrhonian Skeptics (cf. HR I 101, 314–15, II 60–61). If the Academics and Pyrrhonists could object that their arguments do not admit the further and more radical developments on which Descartes insists, Descartes would lose his entitlement to claim that he had overturned that whole tradition.

We saw earlier that ancient skepticism doubted, and gave reasons which Descartes accepts for doubting, anything that purports to be a truth about a real objective world. So it is not surprising, if Descartes thinks he has found examples of knowledge and truth which lie beyond the reach of the traditional skeptical arguments, that these examples should turn out to be truths which an ancient skeptic would hardly have recognized as truths at all.51 Whereas in the First Meditation the discussion focuses in a largely traditional manner on what is true or false of the real world, the outcome of the doubt being, for example, that “body, figure, extension, movement and place are but the fictions of my mind” (HR I 149),52 in the Second Meditation Descartes starts to speak of things being true or false without meaning true or false of a real objective world outside the mind. The reason is that what he now discovers is the truth of statements describing the subjective states involved in the process of doubt itself. No less true than that I exist, he says, is that I am that being who now doubts nearly everything, who nevertheless understands certain things, who affirms that one only is true, who denies all the others, who desires to know more, who is averse to being deceived, who imagines many things (all of which subjective states have been involved in the doubt) — and then comes just the type of statement which I said earlier skeptics did not call true or false: that I am a being who perceives many things, as if by the intervention of the bodily organs. It cannot be false that I seem to see light, to hear noise, to be warmed (HR I 153). Subjective truth has arrived

51 Interestingly, this contrast was well appreciated by Hegel, op. cit., p. 347.
52 Cf. Conversation with Burman, p. 3: “Here we are dealing primarily with the question of whether anything has real existence.”
to stay, constituting one's own experience as an object for description like any other.53

All this adds up to Descartes seeing that he is a thinking thing, and seeing, too, that this is a truth immune from attack by the traditional skeptical devices. The beauty of the procedure is that it is a truth he has reached without applying a criterion, and so without having first to settle the ancient dispute about the criterion of truth. The Pyrrhonists argued that you cannot determine what is true and what is false without first settling on a criterion of truth. And they made sure that no proposed criterion would hold good under examination. But Descartes can go the other way round. He has got a truth without applying a criterion, and he can use this unassailable truth to fix the criterion of truth.54 The criterion is the clear and distinct perception which is what has assured him that he is a thing that thinks (HR I 102, 158). Once again the move is proof against all the resources of the ancient tradition.

To sum up, it is no accident that in Descartes' philosophy the following elements are found in the closest association: hyperbolical doubt and the problem of the existence of the external world, subjective knowledge and truth, the dualism which makes one's own body part of the external world—and the refutation of the ancient skeptical tradition. All these are substantially new with Descartes, and derive from the very seriousness (in one sense) with which he took the traditional skeptical materials. It is essential here that this seriousness is entirely methodological. Descartes several times associates his insistence on pushing doubt as far as it will go for the purposes of the project of Pure Enquiry with a firm rejection of the idea of trying to carry skepticism into the

53 Distinguish this account from the story recently told by Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), esp. Chs. I–II, the moral of which is that indubitability or incorrigibility—the idea that we have incorrigible knowledge of our subjective states—was the innovation by which Descartes created the modern philosophical notion of the mind. Incorrigibility was there before in Hellenistic philosophy, in the shape of Sextus' description of appearance statements as azētētos, immune to question or inquiry (p. 26 above). The addition of truth is what opens up a new realm for substantial knowledge, and it is knowledge not just because it is incorrigible truth but because of what Descartes will build upon it.

54 Cf. Popkin, op. cit., Ch. IX.
practical affairs of life.\textsuperscript{55} And what above all distinguishes the ancient skeptics in his eyes from their modern followers is that the ancient skeptics did try to live their skepticism (HR I 206, II 206, 335). Descartes believed the traditional story that Pyrrho's friends had to follow him around to save him from walking over cliffs and other hazards.\textsuperscript{56} But of course what the story illustrates is that ancient skepticism even at its most extreme did not seriously question that one can walk around in the world. It did not question this, I have argued, because it was in fact entirely serious about carrying skepticism into the practical affairs of life.\textsuperscript{57} I hope that I have made it plausible that Descartes had a very clear appreciation of the theoretical limitations of ancient skepticism and at least the beginnings of an appreciation of the practical reasons behind them.

Above all, Descartes' hyperbolical doubt, going beyond all ancient precedent in its use of the idea of a powerful malignant deity, brought into the open and questioned for the first time the realist assumption, as I have called it, which Greek thought even at its most radical never quite managed to throw off. That was what Berkeley missed. He failed to see that Descartes had achieved a decisive shift of perspective without which no one, not even Berkeley, could have entertained the thought that \textit{esse est percipi}.\textsuperscript{58}

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\textsuperscript{55}HR I, 143, 148, 219–20; II, 44, 206; Letter to Hyperaspistes, August 1641, Kenny, op. cit., p. 110.
\textsuperscript{56}Diogenes Laertius IX 62.
\textsuperscript{57}I have illustrated this by reference to Pyrrhonian happiness, but it is manifest also in the Academic defense of the possibility of skeptical action.
\textsuperscript{58}I am grateful for discussion at the Royal Institute of Philosophy and at the Moral Science Club in Cambridge, and for suggestions from Andreas Berriger, Henry Blumenthal, Ted Honderich, Keith McCullough, David Owen, Hans Sluga, and Richard Sorabji. From Bernard Williams have come both discussion and suggestions, and a great deal more: my starting point in the present essay was an observation of his (n. 1 above), the account in Section I of Plato's argumentative strategy in Part I of the \textit{Theaetetus} is basically his, and I am conscious of more important debts accumulated over the years which cannot be measured in terms of this idea or that. For such gifts the only proper return is the endeavor to make worthy use of what one has learned.