

Ankara Üniversitesi Açık Ders Notları

PHI 107 EPISTEMOLOGY I

TOPIC 1:

Sextus Empiricus, “The Five Modes”

The later Sceptics, however, teach five modes of suspension. These are the following.

The first is based on disagreement. The second is that which produces to infinity. Third, that based on relativity. Fourth, that from assumption. And fifth, the argument in a circle.

That based on disagreement is the one in which we find that in regard to a proposed matter there has arisen in the opinions both of people at large and of the philosophers an unresolved dissension. Because of this dissension we are unable either to choose or to reject anything, and thus we end with suspension of judgement. The mode based on the extension to infinity is the one in which we say that the proof offered for the verification of a proposed matter requires a further verification, and this one another, and so on to infinity, so that since we lack a point of departure for our reasoning, the consequence is suspension of judgement. That based on relativity is that in which, just as we have already said, the object appears thus or thus in relation to the thing judging and the things perceived along with it, while as to its true nature we suspend judgement. The

mode from assumption exists when the dogmatists, in their *regressus ad infinitum*, take as their point of departure a proposition which they do not establish by reasoning, but simply and without proof assume as conceded to them. The mode of argument in a circle arises when that which ought itself to be confirmatory of the matter under investigation requires verification from the thing being investigated; at that point, being unable to take either of them to establish the other, we suspend judgement about both.

That it is possible to refer every question to these modes we shall show briefly as follows. The object proposed is either an object of sense or an object of thought; but no matter which it is, it is a disputed point. For some say that the objects of sense alone are true, some say only the objects of thought are true, while others say that some objects of sense and some objects of thought are true.

Now, will they assert that the disagreement is resolvable, or irresolvable? If irresolvable, then we have the necessity of suspension granted; for it is not possible to pronounce on things when the dispute about them is irresolvable. But if the dispute is resolvable, then we ask from what quarter the decision is to come.

Taking, for example, the object of sense (to fix our argument on this one first), is it to be judged by an object of sense or by an object of thought? If by an object of sense, then, seeing that our inquiry is about objects of sense, that object too will

need another as confirmation. And if that other is an object of sense, again it will itself need another to confirm it, and so on to infinity. But if the object of sense will have to be judged by an object of thought, then, since objects of thought also are a matter of dispute, this object, being an object of thought, will require judgment and confirmation. Where, then, is the confirmation to come from? If it is to be confirmed by an object of thought, we shall likewise have an extension *ad infinitum*; but if by an object of sense, the mode of circular reasoning is introduced, because an object of thought was employed for the confirmation of the object of sense and an object of sense for the confirmation of the object of thought.

If, however, our interlocutor should try to escape from these conclusions and claim the right to assume, as a concession without proof, some proposition serving to prove the rest of his argument, then the mode of assumption will be brought in, which leaves him no way out. For if a person is worthy of credence when he makes an assumption, then we shall in each case also be not less worthy of credence if we make the opposite assumption. And if the person making the assumption assumes something which is true, he renders it suspicious by taking it on assumption instead of proving it. But if what he assumes is false, the foundation of what he is trying to prove will be unsound. Moreover, if assumption

conduces at all towards proof, let the thing in question itself be assumed and not something else by means of which he will then prove the thing under discussion.

But if it is absurd to assume the thing in question, it will also be absurd to assume what transcends it.

But it is evident that all objects of sense are also relative, for they exist as such in relation to those who perceive them. It is clear, then, that whatever sensible object is set before us, it can easily be referred to the five modes. Our reasoning concerning the intelligible object is similar. For if it should be said that it is the subject of an irresolvable disagreement, the necessity of suspending judgement on this matter will be granted us. But in the case of a resolution of the disagreement, if the resolution is reached by means of an object of thought, we shall have recourse to the extension *ad infinitum*; if by means of an object of sense, we shall have recourse to the mode of circular reasoning. For as the sensible again is an object of disagreement, and incapable, because of the extension to infinity, of being decided by means of itself, it will stand in need of the intelligible just as the intelligible also requires the sensible. For these reasons, whoever accepts anything on assumption will again be in an absurd position. But intelligibles are also relative, for they are relative to the intellect in which they appear, whence their name. And if they really were in nature such as they are said to be, there would

be no disagreement about them. Thus the intelligible too has been referred to the five modes, so that in any case we must suspend judgment with regard to the object presented.

Such are the five modes taught by the later Sceptics. Their purpose in setting them forth is not to repudiate the ten modes, but to provide for a more diversified exposure of the rashness of the dogmatists by combining these modes with the others.