

# The sceptic's luck: on fortuitous tranquillity

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Sextus Empiricus twice asserts that, having suspended belief, Pyrrhonian sceptics become tranquil, but that they do so τυχικῶς. This statement is something of a poser, since the Greek adverb has invariably been translated as ‘fortuitously’ or ‘by chance’. If this translation is correct, Sextus’ assertion – that the sceptic’s tranquillity is the result of chance – seems to embroil him in severe philosophical difficulties. Now, he would not be the first to be so embroiled, or the last, and perhaps we should let the matter rest. But out of respect for the sceptic’s reputation, I shall suggest that Sextus – when offering his readers tranquillity – is not actually promising a chance event.

First, I shall examine the difficulties I take Sextus to face if he is indeed stating that chance rules the sceptic’s tranquillity. I shall then submit two ways of saving Sextus from these difficulties. First, I suggest that the Greek adverb may be ambiguous and justify another translation of it, namely ‘fortunately’ or ‘happily’. I shall eventually find what I take to be a fatal flaw in this suggestion. But I shall then argue that, even if we opt for the traditional translation, Sextus only claims that the sceptic’s becoming tranquil resembles a chance event.

## *The difficulties with translating τυχικῶς as ‘fortuitously’*

What philosophical difficulties arise when the adverb τυχικῶς is translated ‘fortuitously’? In his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (= *Pyrr.*) 1.12, Sextus offers an explanation of what he calls ‘the causal principle of scepticism’. At the outset of their quest, seekers of truth are confronted, wherever they look, with unresolved conflicts of appearances. This state of affairs makes them anxious. Explaining this original anxiety, Sextus says:

Ἀρχὴν δὲ τῆς σκεπτικῆς αἰτιώδη μὲν φαμεν εἶναι τὴν ἐλπίδα τοῦ ἀταρακτῆσειν· οἱ γὰρ μεγαλοφνεῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων ταρασσόμενοι διὰ τὴν ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν ἀνωμαλίαν, καὶ ἀποροῦντες τίσιν αὐτῶν χρὴ μᾶλλον συγκατατίθεσθαι, ἤλθον ἐπὶ τὸ ζητεῖν, τί τε ἀληθές ἐστιν ἐν τοῖς πράγμασι καὶ τί ψεῦδος, ὡς ἐκ τῆς ἐπικρίσεως τούτων ἀταρακτῆσοντες.

We say that the causal principle of scepticism is the hope of becoming tranquil. Men of noble nature, anxious because of the anomaly in things, and at a loss as to which of them they should rather assent to, came to seek what in things is true and what false, thinking that by deciding among them they would become tranquil.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are author’s own.

This is a description of those thinkers who happen to end up being sceptics. What they have in common is their original motivation. Confronted with conflicts of appearances, which they have difficulty resolving, they fall prey to anxiety. Their hope is that by succeeding in resolving the conflicts, their anxiety will disappear. Although Sextus never uses the terms τέλος here, his idea may be that the future sceptic's end is tranquillity, simply because the sceptic is anxious in the face of unresolved conflicts of appearances.

In *Pyrr.* 1.25–30 Sextus then attempts to elucidate the tranquillity of sceptics explicitly in terms of their end (1.25):

ἔστι μὲν οὖν τέλος τὸ οὗ χάριν πάντα πράττεται ἢ θεωρεῖται, αὐτὸ δὲ οὐδενὸς ἕνεκα, ἢ τὸ ἔσχατον τῶν ὀρεκτῶν. φαμὲν δὲ ἄχρι νῦν τέλος εἶναι τοῦ σκεπτικοῦ τὴν ἐν τοῖς κατὰ δόξαν ἀταραξίαν καὶ ἐν τοῖς κατηναγκασμένοις μετριοπάθειαν.

Now an end is that for the sake of which everything is done or considered, while it is not itself done or considered for the sake of anything else; or an end is the final object of desire. Up to now we say that the end of the sceptic is tranquillity in matters of belief and moderate affection in matters forced upon us.

There are two ends. First, Sextus seems to refer to the already familiar tranquillity or absence of anxiety caused by the sceptic's inability to resolve the conflict of appearances, i.e. his inability to commit to beliefs. The second end is different: the sceptic hopes – in the absence of beliefs – to be moderately affected by things that necessarily happen to him.

Sextus explains the first end, tranquillity in matters of belief, and it is here that we encounter the claim that the advent of tranquillity is fortuitous – if that is what Sextus means – for the first time (1.26):

ἀρξάμενος γὰρ φιλοσοφεῖν ὑπὲρ τοῦ τὰς φαντασίας ἐπικρῖναι καὶ καταλαβεῖν, τίνες μὲν εἰσιν ἀληθεῖς τίνες δὲ ψευδεῖς, ὥστε ἀταρακτῆσαι, ἐνέπεσεν εἰς τὴν ἰσοσθενῆ διαφωνίαν, ἣν ἐπικρῖναι μὴ δυνάμενος ἐπέσχευ· ἐπισχόντι δὲ αὐτῷ **τυχικῶς** παρηκολούθησεν ἢ ἐν τοῖς δοξαστοῖς ἀταραξία.

For having begun to philosophize in order to decide appearances and apprehend which were true and which were false, so as to become tranquil, he [the sceptic] fell upon equipollent dispute, and being unable to decide this he suspended belief. Tranquillity in matters of opinion followed him closely, as he suspended belief, fortuitously.

This explanation refers back to the hope of the noble seeker of truth (expressed in *Pyrr.* 1.12); it does not seem to describe the end of someone who is already a sceptic, but rather of someone who may yet become a sceptic. When the person in question, faced with unresolved conflicts of appearances, suspended

belief, he found tranquillity thrust upon him fortuitously, i.e. by chance or by accident. The sceptic who suspended belief must have been surprised.

The problem with this explanation is this: what happens by chance is not wont to happen always; if it always happened, it would hardly happen by chance. One cannot expect something to happen if it only happens by chance. Nor can one aim at achieving some outcome if the outcome is only a matter of chance. But this is what Sextus offers at this point, if the correct translation of τυχικῶς is ‘fortuitously’: the person who suspended belief in the face of an unresolved conflict of beliefs became tranquil by chance, i.e. he achieved the very outcome he had hoped to achieve by resolving the conflicts of appearances.

In another work, *Against the Professors*, Sextus seems very much aware of the pitfalls of explanations in terms of chance (*Math.* 5.46–7):

ἐπεὶ τῶν γινομένων τὰ μὲν κατ’ ἀνάγκην γίνεται τὰ δὲ κατὰ τύχην τὰ δὲ παρ’ ἡμᾶς, πάντως οἱ Χαλδαῖοι, εἰ δυνατῆς ἐφίενται προρρήσεως, ἤτοι ἐν τοῖς κατ’ ἀνάγκην ποιήσονται τὰς προαγορεύσεις ἢ ἐν τοῖς κατὰ τύχην ἐκβαίνουσιν ἢ ἐν τοῖς παρ’ ἡμᾶς. καὶ εἰ μὲν ἐν τοῖς κατ’ ἀνάγκην, ἀνωφελεῖς εἰσιν ἐν τῷ βίῳ· τὸ γὰρ κατ’ ἀνάγκην συμβαῖνον οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκκλίνειν, ἀλλ’ ἐάν τε θέλωμεν ἐάν τε μὴ θέλωμεν, ἐκβῆναι δεῖ τὸ τοιοῦτο ... εἰ δ’ ἐν τοῖς τυχηροῖς, ἀδύνατόν τι ἐπαγγέλλονται· ἄστατα γὰρ τὰ τυχηρῶς γινόμενα, τῶν δὲ ἀστάτων καὶ ἄλλοτε ἄλλως ἐκβαίνόντων οὐκ ἔστιν ἐστῶσαν ποιεῖσθαι τὴν προαγόρευσιν.

Since of things that happen, some happen by necessity, others by chance, and others by our own means, if the Chaldeans aim at possible prophesies, they will at all events either make their forecasts about those things that happen by necessity or those which occur by chance or those that occur by our means. And if they do so about necessary things, they are useless in life; for it is impossible to avert what occurs by necessity, but that must occur whether we like it or don’t like it ... If it is about things that happen by chance, they profess what is impossible; for what happens by chance is unstable, and of things that are unstable and occur differently at different times it is not possible to make a secure forecast.

At this point, Sextus offers another explanation of the connection between suspension of belief and tranquillity. Before we turn to that explanation, let us first consider an objection to the above account. If, by this account, Sextus does not intend to offer his explanation in terms of the motivational source of a novice philosopher, but rather as the end of a mature sceptic, he must be saying that by suspending belief the sceptic aims for tranquillity in matters of belief, having realized that this does work, even if only by chance. This interpretation is challenged by the fact that Sextus explicitly references ‘the causal principle of scepticism’ (*Pyr.* 1.12) as an explanation of the sceptic’s end: the person who turned out to be a sceptic aims for tranquillity in the sense that this is how he started on the road which led him to scepticism. But

the following point favours the interpretation that follows: the sceptic aims at moderate affection in matters of necessity. And this end is not presented as a part of a causal principle of scepticism, although it may be understood as such.

Admittedly, Sextus claims (*Pyrr.* 1.25):

φαμέν δὲ ἄχρι νῦν τέλος εἶναι τοῦ σκεπτικοῦ τὴν ἐν τοῖς κατὰ δόξαν ἀταραξίαν καὶ ἐν τοῖς κατηναγκασμένοις μετριοπάθειαν.

Up to now we say that the end of the sceptic is tranquillity in matters of belief and moderate affection in matters forced upon us.

The qualification ‘up to now’ appears to refer to the – thus far – successful acquisition of tranquillity through suspension of belief. So perhaps Sextus is not only describing what the noble novice hopes to achieve through finding the truth, but also what the mature sceptic achieves through suspending belief, i.e. both tranquillity and moderate affection.

Nevertheless, if the traditional translation of τυχικῶς is correct, Sextus has only explained the onset of tranquillity as being fortuitous or by chance. I have already indicated the problems with this line of thought: In what sense can one hope to achieve something by chance? In the same sense as a lottery ticket buyer hopes to win the jackpot? Is tranquillity the intended result of suspending belief, although it only comes about fortuitously?

If it is indeed the case that tranquillity is the intended result of suspending belief, although it comes about fortuitously, it will in fact turn out that the chance which brings about tranquillity is fairly reliable, according to Sextus, because it is possible to explain why it does so (*Pyrr.* 1.27–8):

ὁ μὲν γὰρ δοξάζων τι καλὸν τῆ φύσει ἢ κακὸν εἶναι ταρασσεται διὰ παντός· καὶ ὅτε μὴ πάρεστιν αὐτῷ τὰ καλὰ εἶναι δοκοῦντα, ὑπὸ τε τῶν φύσει κακῶν νομίζει ποινηλατεῖσθαι καὶ διώκει τὰ ἀγαθὰ, ὡς οἶεται· ἄπερ κτησάμενος πλείοσι ταραχαῖς περιπίπτει, διὰ τε τὸ παρὰ λόγον καὶ ἀμέτρως ἐπαίρεσθαι καὶ φοβούμενος τὴν μεταβολὴν πάντα πράσσει, ἵνα μὴ ἀποβάλλῃ τὰ ἀγαθὰ αὐτῷ δοκοῦντα εἶναι. ὁ δὲ ἀοριστῶν περὶ τῶν πρὸς τὴν φύσιν καλῶν ἢ κακῶν οὔτε φεύγει τι οὔτε διώκει συντόμως· διόπερ ἀταρακτεῖ.

For he who believes that something is good by nature or bad is forever anxious. And when he lacks those things that seem to him good, he both thinks that he is persecuted by natural evils and he pursues what he thinks are goods. When he has acquired these things he encounters more anxieties, both because he is elated beyond reason and measure and fearing change he does everything in order not to lose what seem to him to be goods. But he who determines nothing regarding natural goods or evils neither avoids anything nor pursues intensely. Hence he is tranquil.

So, the sceptic is tranquil because he does not have beliefs about what is by nature good or bad, unlike the dogmatists, who end up anxious because of their beliefs. This actually explains the sceptic's tranquillity, which nevertheless arrives τυχικῶς. If this adverb means 'fortuitously', the explanation in terms of value beliefs is unintelligible.

The sceptic can look forward to being tranquil, and it turns out that this is because he suspends belief. In order to explain the sceptic's *aiming* for tranquillity, Sextus then offers an analogy by telling the story of the painter Apelles (*Pyrr.* 1.28–9):

ὅπερ οὖν περὶ Ἀπελλοῦ τοῦ ζωγράφου λέγεται, τοῦτο ὑπῆρξε τῷ σκεπτικῷ. φασὶ γὰρ ὅτι ἐκεῖνος ἵππον γράφων καὶ τὸν ἄφρον τοῦ ἵππου μιμήσασθαι τῇ γραφῇ βουλευθεὶς οὕτως ἀπετύγχανεν ὡς ἀπειπεῖν καὶ τὴν σπογγίαν εἰς ἣν ἀπέμασσε τὰ ἀπὸ τοῦ γραφείου χρώματα προσρῖψαι τῇ εἰκόνι· τὴν δὲ προσασαμένην ἵππου ἄφροῦ ποιῆσαι μίμημα. καὶ οἱ σκεπτικοὶ οὖν ἤλπιζον μὲν τὴν ἀταραξίαν ἀναλήψεσθαι διὰ τοῦ τὴν ἀνωμαλίαν τῶν φαινομένων τε καὶ νοουμένων ἐπικρῖναι, μὴ δυναθέντες δὲ ποιῆσαι τοῦτο ἐπέσχον· ἐπισχοῦσι δὲ αὐτοῖς οἷον τυχικῶς ἢ ἀταραξία παρηκολούθησεν ὡς σκιά σώματι.

What is said about Apelles the painter applies to the sceptic. For they say that while painting a horse and wanting to imitate in the picture the horse's foam, he was so unsuccessful that he gave up and threw the sponge, with which he wiped the colours of his brush, at the picture; when the sponge hit the picture it created an imitation of the horse's foam. And the sceptics, then, hoped to achieve tranquillity through deciding the anomaly of appearances and thoughts, but being unable to do this suspended belief. As they suspended belief, tranquillity followed closely as if fortuitously, like a shadow follows a body.

The lesson of the story is apparently this: suspend belief and you will find that you fortuitously become tranquil in matters of belief. Sextus uses the imagery that Diogenes Laertius, who refers it to Aenesidemus and Timon (9.107), will later use:

τέλος δὲ οἱ σκεπτικοὶ φασὶ τὴν ἐποχήν, ἣ σκιάς τρόπον ἐπακολουθεῖ ἢ ἀταραξία, ὡς φασιν οἱ τε περὶ τὸν Τίμωνα καὶ Αἰνεσίδημον.

The sceptics say that the end is suspension of belief, which is followed by tranquillity like a shadow, as those around Timon and Aenesidemus say.

It is noteworthy that according to Diogenes the end is not tranquillity, but rather the suspension of belief that is attended by tranquillity.

In all, if Sextus claims that tranquillity follows suspension of belief fortuitously or by chance, his other explanations of the connection between suspension and tranquillity are surprising. One explanation is in terms of value

beliefs; this explanation actually eliminates the element of chance. Sextus also suggests that one may hope for tranquillity if one suspends belief, even if one achieves it by chance. Finally, Sextus seems to say that tranquillity follows suspension of belief fortuitously, but he also says that shadows follow bodies in the same fortuitous manner. Is it likely that Sextus would offer shadows following bodies as an example of a chance event? Furthermore, consider Sextus' choice of verb when describing tranquillity *following* suspension of belief. He uses the verb παρακολουθεῖν, 'to follow closely', just like a shadow follows a body. The verb can even indicate the inseparability of cause and effect (cf. e.g. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics* 99a17).

Is it charitable to foist this view on Sextus? I suggest that it is uncharitable and also that the idea that Sextus would have suggested it defies belief. Hence I shall tentatively suggest two ways out for Sextus. Let us first consider the possibility of translating the adverb differently.

### *Another translation of τυχικῶς*

The strange faults in Sextus' accounts may hinge on translating the adverb τυχικῶς as 'fortuitously' or 'by chance'. The adverb is both late and rare. In Sextus it only occurs in his description of sceptical tranquillity. If we translate it as 'fortunately' or 'happily', we remove much of Sextus' difficulties. He is at liberty to offer an explanation of a causal relationship between suspension of belief and tranquillity if the outcome is merely fortunate or happy, as opposed to fortuitous or by chance. Indeed, for the sceptic, achieving tranquillity is a happy outcome. Also, it is more reasonable that the sceptic hopes for an outcome which turns out not to be a chance outcome, but rather a happy outcome. But even if this translation, which treats the adverb as a value term referring to good fortune as opposed to chance, yields a reading more sensible than the previous translation, is it justified?

First, we should consider the meaning of the noun τύχη. It may refer to a successful outcome, or fortune, both good and bad, as well as chance. This term, then, is ambiguous. The adverb, however, is not the noun. Let us also consider the fact that the adverb τυχηρῶς, which is slightly more common and certainly older than τυχικῶς, is ambiguous in exactly this manner, between 'fortuitously', as in Sextus 5.47 (cited above), and 'happily', as in Aristophanes' *Acharnians* 250 and *Thesmophoriazusae* 305. The corresponding adjective, τυχηρός, is ambiguous in the same manner.

Let us now turn to our adverb. In three examples, it seems ambiguous, namely in Polybius (28.7.1; he also uses the adjective τυχικός in 9.6.5), and Diodorus Siculus (2.19.4 and 16.35.5). Other examples include the Epicurean

Diogenianus (4.17), where the translation ‘fortuitously’ does seem necessary, as is true of pseudo-Plutarch, *Placita philosophorum* 906E (5.12). Other examples of the adverb are much later. In short, one might suggest that Sextus may not have meant ‘fortuitously’, but rather ‘happily’.

Going against this suggestion, however, is not so much the other uses of the adverb, but rather the analogy that Sextus uses to explain the advent. He follows Timon and Aenesidemus in saying that tranquillity follows suspension of belief *like shadows follow bodies*, since it is unacceptably peculiar to insist that shadows happily or fortunately follow bodies.

### *Fortuitously and as if fortuitously*

Let us then assume that it is correct to translate τυχικῶς as ‘fortuitously’. As indicated above, Sextus refers twice to the advent of tranquillity. In *Pyr.* 1.26 he says: ἐπισχόντι δὲ αὐτῷ τυχικῶς παρηκολούθησεν ἢ ἐν τοῖς δοξαστοῖς ἀταραξία, and in *Pyr.* 1.29 he claims that ἐπισχοῦσι δὲ αὐτοῖς οἷον τυχικῶς ἢ ἀταραξία παρηκολούθησεν ὡς σκιά σώματι. There is a difference between the two statements: the second statement is qualified in a manner that the first statement is not. According to the latter statement, tranquillity follows suspension, not quite fortuitously, but *as if* fortuitously or *as it were* fortuitous. What does this qualification add?

By qualifying the statement in this manner Sextus seems to be saying that *strictly speaking* tranquillity does not follow suspension of belief by chance, but that its advent is *like* that of a chance event. One might ask in what respect this outcome is like a chance event. Surely the answer would be that the outcome is unexpected, unintended; it is in this respect that it is like a chance event. The future sceptic did not intend to assuage his anxiety by suspending belief. On the contrary – hence the unexpectedness – he intended to rid himself of anxiety by actually resolving conflicts of appearances. Hence, it came as a surprise to him that he managed to rid himself of anxiety by suspending belief.

Sextus even offers an explanation as to why the sceptic, having suspended belief, ends up finding himself tranquil. This explanation refers to the absence of beliefs in natural values. It turns out that the sceptic unexpectedly ended up tranquil because he suspended belief about there being natural values.

According to this account, Sextus does not claim that the advent of tranquillity is a chance event; rather he claims that it resembles a chance event. If we accept this account, we may be in a better position to understand in what sense tranquillity is the end of the mature sceptic (but not only of the future sceptic). The sceptic qua sceptic, i.e. one who juxtaposes opposing

appearances and fails to resolve their conflict, suspends belief and finds that tranquillity, which he hoped for in the beginning, ensues. And since tranquillity is his end, he continues to suspend belief because it makes him tranquil.