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ould ignorance really make you a happier person? A group of ancient Greek philosophers thought so. Called the Sceptics, they argued that we should not form beliefs, and this will lead us to be happy, or in their words, tranquil.

To understand why, let us first see why they thought we should not form beliefs. The Sceptics pointed out that there are different laws, different lifestyles, and different ideas about what is really true, or what is good or bad. The problem, they claimed, is that for any given belief there will be evidence and arguments in favour of it and equally good evidence and arguments against it, and so no way to tell which beliefs are right. We might turn to other people to guide us, but when we do we find no consensus, only differences of opinion. We might decide to defer to the judgement of experts, like scientists or academics, but we find that they always disagree too. So we might decide to side with the majority, but even this will not help because the only way to know which side the majority favours is to canvas everyone, which is impossible. With no way of knowing which beliefs are right, the Sceptic says that the proper response is not to have them at all, and to suspend judgement instead.

We might wonder how easy it is to do this. It is certainly possible to go too far, as one Sceptic apparently did. It is reported that a Sceptic called Pyrrho decided to suspend his judgement even about what his own senses told him, and as a result his friends had to keep intervening to stop him being run over by carts and falling off cliffs! But most Sceptics did not go to such extremes. Instead, they recommended that we live in accordance with how things appear to us and so follow everyday requirements, just without any beliefs getting in the way. In other words, they recommended a life not guided by beliefs and principles but by natural reactions. So we eat when we’re hungry, drink when we’re thirsty, and follow the same rules as those around us. In living this way, the Sceptic isn’t committing themself to whether such rules are right or wrong but just falling in with appearances, so to speak. Perhaps the Sceptic motto ought to be something like: don’t believe, just do.

But how can living this way help us? The Sceptics’ answer is that holding beliefs leaves the mind ‘perpetually troubled’, while not holding beliefs frees the mind from disturbances. This is because when a person lacks something they believe to be good, they are desperate to obtain it, which causes them anxiety. And if they obtain it, then they will be desperate to keep it, which also causes them anxiety. There are obvious examples of this. Many people prize a particular job, a particular salary, a particular house or car etc, because they believe these things to be good. They will experience anxiety trying to obtain these things and more anxiety trying to keep them once they have them. Such people are not tranquil – they are constantly agitated by trying to get what they want or trying to keep it. The Sceptic says that there is no basis for believing that the things we strive for really are good, so we shouldn’t get bent out of shape pursuing them. If we don’t hold beliefs about what is good then it won’t bother us if we miss out on things that others think are good. In short, we will be tranquil.

Another downside of having beliefs is the emotional investment we make in them. Those who are emotionally invested in a belief will feel troubled if the belief is challenged. Think of the scientist who has developed a particular theory but now finds evidence against it, or the theologian who comes to question whether God really exists. Such people will experience anxiety, all because they hold beliefs that, according to the Sceptic, they shouldn’t have held in the first place. So the Sceptic says: if one has no beliefs then there is no need to fight for them or worry about them being wrong. In other words, we would be tranquil rather than anxious.

According to the Sceptic, then, there is no fiendishly complicated way to obtain tranquillity – all a person needs to do is suspend their judgement (on the grounds that there is no way to determine which beliefs are right), and tranquillity will ensue. No need for meditation, mindfulness, or yoga – all you need for tranquillity is a healthy dollop of Scepticism.

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