

Against Logicians (Πρὸς λογικού)
by Sextus Empiricus
(early 3rd century CE)



Living sometime around the year 200 CE,
Sextus Empiricus was a medical doctor & a Pyrrhonian philosopher.

Even though he lived within the territory of the Roman Empire,
he wrote in his native Greek (rather than in the Roman language of Latin).

Along with writing *Against Logicians* (Πρὸς λογικού), he also wrote
Against Physicists (Πρὸς Πρὸς φυσικούς) and *Against Ethicists* (Πρὸς ἠθικούς).

As you read the following three pages,
think about *why* he chose those titles as names for his works.

Read the following three pages
from Book 1 of *Against Logicians*, and
then answer the questions about what you've read.

Book 1

Philosophy is a complex affair. Hence for the sake of an orderly and methodical inquiry into all of its parts, we *first* must answer the question of what philosophy's parts *are*. Some philosophers believe that philosophy has only *one* part, other philosophers believe that philosophy has only *two* parts, and the remaining philosophers believe that philosophy has only *three* parts. Of those philosophers who believe that philosophy has only *one* part, some believe that its only part is *physics*, others believe that its only part is *ethics*, and the rest believe that its only part is *logic*. Of those philosophers who believe that it has only *two* parts, some believe that its only parts are physics & *logic*, others believe that its only parts are physics & *ethics*, and the rest believe that its only parts are *logic* & ethics. Of those philosophers who believe that it has *three* parts, all of them agree that the *only* three parts of philosophy are *physics*, *logic*, and *ethics*.

According to some authors, the philosophers who believed that *physics* is the one and *only* part of philosophy were early philosophers such as Thales of Miletus, Anaximander of Miletus, Anaximenes of Miletus, Heraclitus of Ephesus, Parmenides of Elea, and Empedocles of Akragas. Yet even though *nobody* disputes this point about Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes, *some* authors dispute this about Empedocles, Parmenides, and Heraclitus. For example, Aristotle says that Empedocles cultivated the art of rhetoric, which corresponds to dialectic (or logic), and it would seem to be that Parmenides was not unfamiliar with dialectic (or logic), because Aristotle regarded Parmenides' friend Zeno of Elea as 'the pioneer of dialectic'. As for Heraclitus, it is clear that he was a physicist (φυσικός), but it is unclear whether or not he *also* was an ethicist (ἠθικός). In any case, these are the leading φυσικοί (physicists), regardless of whether or not they believed that physics is the *only* part of philosophy.

According to his friends, Socrates was concerned *only* with *ethics*. For example, Xenophon of Athens said that Socrates "rejected physics as being beyond our human ability to understand, and so he devoted himself to ethics, which concerns humans." The Pyrrhonian philosopher Timon of Phlius also said this about Socrates. According to Timon, Socrates turned away from physics and turned toward the study of ethics. Yet in contrast, Plato ascribes to Socrates every division of philosophy. According to Plato, Socrates investigated *logical* matters (such as definitions, divisions, and etymology); Socrates studied *ethical* matters (such as virtue, government, and law); and Socrates studied *physical* matters (such as the universe, animal creation, and the soul). Yet criticizing Plato for decking out Socrates with a host of investigations, Timon said, "Plato wanted to believe that Socrates was more than just a simple teacher of ethics."

According to some authors, the Cyrenaics *only* studied *ethics*, and they rejected physics & logic, because they believed that physics & logic contribute nothing to the happiness (εὐδαιμονία) of life. Yet even so, other authors have supposed that this view is disproven by how the Cyrenaics divide ethics into sections: a section dealing with objects of choice & aversion, a section treating of the emotions, a section treating of actions, a section concerned with causes, and a section dealing with *arguments*. If this is true about the Cyrenaics, then the section treating of *causes* is merely *physics*, and the section treating of *arguments* is merely *logic*, such that the Cyrenaics actually *had* studied *three* parts of philosophy overall: *ethics*, *logic*, and *physics*. Nonetheless, logic was the *only* part of philosophy for the Megarian philosophers Eubulides of Miletus, Alexinus of Elis, Panthoides the Dialectician, and Bryson of Achaea, and logic *also* was the only part of philosophy for sophists such as the brothers Dionysodorus of Chios & Euthydemus of Chios.

According to certain authors, the Stoic philosopher Ariston of Chios rejected the study of physics & logic on the grounds that they harm anyone who studies them, and he also rejected some branches of ethics. According to *some* authors, Epicurus *also* rejected the study of logic. Yet according to *other* authors, Epicurus did not reject logic altogether, but rather rejected only the Stoic logic, and he effectively believed that there are three parts of philosophy: physics, logic, and ethics.

According to *some* authors, Xenophanes of Colophon investigated only physics & *logic* as matters of philosophical investigation, and Archelaus of Miletus investigated only physics & *ethics* as matters of philosophical investigation. Moreover, some authors (such as the historian Sotion of Alexandria) claim that the Cyrenaics believed that both *ethics* & *logic* are parts of philosophy. Yet, these authors seem to have handled the question incompletely. Alas in comparison with such authors, the tripartite division of philosophy into physics, ethics, and logic is far more satisfactory.

Of the philosophers who divide philosophy into physics, ethics, and logic, Plato was virtually the very first to do so, because he discussed many problems of physics, ethics, and logic. Those who most clearly adopt this tripartite division of philosophy are the Peripatetics, the Stoics, and the Academic philosopher Xenocrates of Chalcedon. Hence quite plausibly, they liken philosophy to a garden of fruits, comparing physics to the height of the plants, ethics to the richness of the fruits, and logic to the strength of the walls of the plants and their fruits. In contrast, certain other philosophers say that philosophy resembles an egg, whereby ethics is like the yolk (or chick), physics is like the egg-white (or nutriment for the yolk), and logic is like the outside of the eggshell.

Yet on the grounds that the parts of philosophy are inseparable from each other, the Stoic philosopher Posidonius of Apamea instead had preferred to compare philosophy to an animal, whereby physics is like the animal's blood & flesh, logic is like the animal's bones, and ethics is like the animal's soul.

Consider further the philosophers who regard philosophy as having exactly three parts: physics, ethics, and logic. Among those philosophers who regard philosophy as tripartite, some put *physics* as its first part for two reasons.¹ First, it holds first place historically, because the earliest philosophers have been called physicists. Second, it makes sense to begin philosophy by discussing the whole of nature before we go on to investigate the particulars of it (such as human nature). Yet among *other* philosophers who regard philosophy as tripartite, some put *ethics* as its first part, because they have regarded it as the subject that invites us to understand happiness (εὐδαιμονία), which is more important than anything else. For example, Socrates confessed that his only subject of inquiry was good & evil. Among the *remaining* philosophers who regard philosophy as tripartite, they put *logic* as its first part. For example, the Epicureans start off with logic. The Stoics believe that logic comes first, ethics comes second, and physics comes last. According to them, *logic comes first*, because dialectic makes our thinking rigorous; but *ethics comes second*, because it steadfastly aims at the improvement of our ἥθη (habits/morals/character); and *physics comes last*, because it by far is the most divine (θειότερα) subject, which requires our utmost attention.

Such are the views of these thinkers. Yet alas, we are not yet investigating this matter with exactness. Nonetheless, if truth is to be sought in every part of philosophy, then trustworthy principles & methods for discerning the truth first must be possessed.

¹ Yet according to Aristotle, physics is δευτέρας φιλοσοφίας (secondary philosophy). According to him, πρώτη φιλοσοφία (first philosophy) is the study of τὸ ὄν ᾗ ὄν (being-as-being), which is now the branch of philosophy that is known as μεταφυσικά (metaphysics). Yet along with how it is not the same as physics, metaphysics also is neither ethics nor logic.

Questions about Book 1

1. According to Sextus Empiricus, who was the very *first* philosopher to clearly make the tripartite division of philosophy into physics, ethics, and logic?
2. According to Sextus Empiricus, what might be a reason why some philosophers believe that, before you can investigate ethics & logic, you first must investigate physics?
3. According to Sextus Empiricus, what might be a reason why some philosophers believe that, before you can investigate physics & ethics, you first must investigate logic?

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