Some notes on Sextus Empiricus’ method of approaching the téchnai

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Abstract: We aim to show how Sextus Empiricus develops his attack on the téchnai in Against the Professors (M I-VI). First of all, we will outline the concept of stoicheion (plural: stoicheia) in Aristotle, for we think that the wide use of the concept by the Hellenistic Philosophers addresses itself to Aristotle’s employment of it. Thus, Sextus Empiricus approaches the téchnai through a paradigm internal to their own systematization, from their “elements” (stoicheia). Secondly, we will take into consideration Sextus’ approach to grammar, and we link this discussion on grammar to the other téchnai. Finally, we aim to identify the political and pedagogical consequences of Sextus’ approach.

Keywords: Pyrrhonism; Sextus Empiricus; “Against the Professors”; téchnai; stoicheion.
1. Abbreviations:

Aristotle:
Met. = Metaphysics
Rh. = Rhetoric
Top. = Topics

Sextus Empiricus:
PH = Outlines of Pyrrhonism
M I-VI = Against the Professors (or Mathematicians)
M I = Against the Grammarians = Adv. Gram.
M II = Against the Rhetoricians = Adv. Rhet.
M III = Against the Geometers = Adv. Geo.
M IV = Against the Arithmeticians = Adv. Arith.
M V = Against the Astrologers = Adv. Ast.
M VI = Against the Musicians = Adv. Mus.
M VII-XI = Against the Dogmatists
M VII = Against the Logicians I = Adv. Log. I
M VIII = Against the Logicians II = Adv. Log. II
M IX = Against the Physicists I = Adv. Phy. I
M X = Against the Physicists II = Adv. Phy. II
M XI = Against the Ethicists = Adv. Eth.

2. Methodological paradigm

This paper is not directly concerned with demonstrating the feasibility of Scepticism, regardless of how Scepticism is understood, either in its Pyrrhonian or Academic varieties. It is also not concerned with the later development and reception of the conceptual framework of Scepticism, although both subjects are going to be featured indirectly.

In this essay our goal is to think about the possible results of Sextus Empiricus’ line of attack on the téchnai (arts, or crafts) as it appears mainly in his work entitled Against the Professors. In this work, the philosopher/physician methodically attacks the disciplines that form part of the cyclical studies:
grammar, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astrology and music\(^1\).

Sextus’ method for destroying the téchnai is to criticize the elements (stoicheia) which constitute these téchnai. As far as we can see from the extant evidence, Aristotle is the first to develop a philosophical conception of téchnē as a kind of craft in which the quality of the performance is related to the handling of certain constitutive elements (stoicheia). Although in Aristotle’s works the majority of the occurrences of the term stoicheia refers to the constitutive elements of nature (cf. De Anima, 404a5; 405b8; 410a2, 17-19; 410b11; 423b28; Met.985a25, 32; 986a2, 18; 986b7-9; 987b19; etc.), there is a famous passage in the Rhetoric in which Aristotle exhorts one to discover first the various types of rhetoric in order to define them, so that one can investigate what the constitutive elements (stoicheia) of each kind are (Rh.1358a35). Thus for Aristotle there are three kinds of rhetoric: deliberative, forensic and demonstrative. For instance, the deliberative kind is aimed to exhort or dissuade about things to do – for its special time is the future (Rh. 1358b14) – and the stoicheia which compound this kind of rhetoric are e.g. the specific kinds of arguments used to encourage or discourage a course of action in the face of a matter which needs a deliberation, as war, so the specific arguments to be employed are always inductive\(^2\).

\(^1\) Respectively as treated by Sextus in M I-VI. The Dialectic is generally treated in Adv. Log.