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Again on Sextus on Persuasiveness and Equipollence

DOI 10.1515/agph-2017-0010

Abstract: This paper engages with Svavar Svavarsson’s recent essay, “Sextus Empiricus on Persuasiveness and Equipollence,” arguing against both (i) his interpretation of whether two rival arguments appear equipollent to the Pyrrhonist because he himself is equally persuaded by both of them, and (ii) his interpretation of the way in which the argument from possible disagreement is supposed to induce suspension of judgment in the Pyrrhonist. In so doing, I aim to dispel some serious misunderstandings regarding key aspects of the Pyrrhonist’s skeptical outlook and argumentative practice.

1 Introduction

In a recent essay, Svavar Svavarsson examines the notions of persuasiveness and equipollence in Sextus Empiricus’s presentation of Pyrrhonism. Although in previous work I explored the issues discussed by Svavarsson,¹ I would like to revisit them here and argue against both (i) his interpretation of whether two rival arguments appear equipollent to the Skeptic because he himself is equally persuaded by both of them, and (ii) his interpretation of the way in which what I have elsewhere called “the argument from possible disagreement” is supposed to induce suspension of judgment in the Skeptic.² My reason for revisiting these issues is that exploring them further will help to dispel some serious misunderstandings regarding key aspects of the Pyrrhonist’s skeptical outlook and argumentative practice. In Section 2 I will deal with (i), while in Section 3 I will address (ii).

1 See Machuca 2009; 2011a. Svavarsson 2014, 356 fn. 2, mentions the former of these papers but without discussing any aspect of the interpretation defended therein.

2 Following standard practice, I use “Skeptic” and “Pyrrhonist” as well as “Skepticism” and “Pyrrhonism” interchangeably.

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2 Equipollence and Two Kinds of Persuasiveness

Svavarsson is concerned to explain what he views as a twofold role of the notion of persuasiveness or as two kinds of persuasion in Sextus:

On the one hand Sextus suggests that the skeptic suspends belief because he experiences contrary accounts (λόγοι) for appearances (i.e. accounts that purport to establish the truth of particular appearances) as *equal with regard to being persuasive and unpersuasive*. [...] On the other hand, Sextus does allow the skeptic to be persuaded of something being the case just in the sense of experiencing the appearance that such is the case, so long as this appearance does not consist in being persuaded by one account rather than another, since that would presumably violate the equipollence of the contrary accounts. (2014, 356 f.)³

Thus, one kind of persuasiveness is that of the arguments the Pyrrhonist examines in his inquiry into which appearances are true and which are false, while the other kind of persuasiveness is that of certain appearances themselves. Those familiar with Sextus's writings will immediately find this taxonomy of types of persuasiveness problematic inasmuch as it is artificial to distinguish between appearances and arguments about appearances, since the Pyrrhonist regards the arguments he examines as intellectual appearances: arguments appear to the Pyrrhonist to be thus and so. Two examples will suffice. First, in the course of his explanation of the Skeptical φωναί, Sextus tells us that, when uttering the phrase "To every argument an equal argument is opposed," he implicitly means this: "To every argument investigated by me that establishes something dogmatically, there appears to me to be opposed another argument establishing something dogmatically, equal to the former in credibility and lack of credibility (πιστίαν καὶ ἀπιστίαν)" (Πυρρώνειοι Ὑποτυπώσεις [PH] I 203).⁴ Hence, when the Pyrrhonist finds any two conflicting arguments equally credible or persuasive, this means that they appear so to him. Second, in the course of his reply to the dogmatic objection that the Pyrrhonist cannot engage in investigation, Sextus remarks:

³ I should note, first, that I agree with Svavarsson 2014, 356 fn. 2, that Sextus employs πίστις and πιθανότης as well as πιστόν and πιθανόν interchangeably (see Machuca 2009, 113 fn. 13). However, while Svavarsson prefers to translate the two pairs of terms as "persuasiveness" and "persuasive," respectively, I use these translations for πιθανότης and πιθανόν, and render πίστις and πιστόν as "credibility" and "credible." Second, while Svavarsson translates λόγοι as "accounts," I prefer "arguments."

⁴ The translations of Sextus's texts are my own, but I have consulted Annas/Barnes 2000 and Bett 2005.

“For the Skeptic is not excluded, I suppose, from thought that both arises from arguments that passively strike him, appearing evidently to him (τῶν παθητικῶς ὑποπιπτόντων κατ’ ἐνάργειαν φαινόμενων αὐτῷ λόγων), and in no way implies the reality of the things that are thought” (PH II 10). Thus, the Pyrrhonist carries out his philosophical investigation into the Dogmatists’ doctrines by considering arguments that appear evidently to him.⁵

Svavarsson himself seems aware of the artificiality of the above distinction because he remarks that arguments can be the source of the Pyrrhonist’s affections or that appearances can arise from arguments (2014, 360 f., 365), and because he finds a problem in the fact that, according to him,

Sextus also suggests that what appears to the skeptic to be the case may appear so to him *precisely because he is persuaded* at some point by one account of that’s [sic] being the case rather than by an account for the contrary. If that is what Sextus has in mind, the equal persuasiveness of contrary accounts that the skeptic experiences evidently need not mean that his experience consists in *his* being equally persuaded by contrary accounts. The skeptic could be persuaded by one account rather than another and still experience the equal persuasiveness of both accounts. I shall suggest [...] that the equal persuasiveness of contrary accounts rather means that contrary accounts persuade different people differently or the same person at different instances. This equal persuasiveness is apparent to the skeptic and he cannot opt for either account. He has no means to determine by which account *he ought to be persuaded*, even as [sic] he as a matter of fact may be persuaded by one of the accounts. [...] This interpretation of equipollence does not entail that the skeptic cannot suspend belief because he is equally persuaded by both accounts; it just entails that he need not be so persuaded. (2014, 357)

Svavarsson is right in that there seems to be an incongruity or inconsistency in Sextus’s treatment of argumentative persuasiveness that needs to be accounted for. I would say that such an inconsistency consists in that, according to Sextus, in certain cases rival arguments on a given topic appear equally persuasive or credible to the Skeptic while at the same time only one of them appears so to him. And so, if one wants to explain away such an inconsistency as merely apparent, one needs to distinguish between two ways in which an argument may appear persuasive or credible to the Skeptic himself. This is not Svavarsson’s approach,

⁵ In reply to a question posed by a reviewer, I should note that these intellectual appearances are indeed what Sextus calls τὰ νοούμενα or τὰ νοητά at PH I 8 f. But note that Sextus explicitly remarks that in this passage his use of τὰ φαινόμενα to designate τὰ αἰσθητά is not his standard use: “at present (νῦν) we take ‘things that appear’ to be perceptual objects, which is why we contrast them with objects of thought” (PH I 9; cf. PH I 31–33). As most specialists are well aware, Sextus typically employs φαινόμενον to designate what appears in general, i.e. both perceptual and intellectual appearances.

for he argues that the Skeptic may find or experience two arguments as equally persuasive or credible even though only one of them persuades him. On the face of it, Svavarsson's interpretation is problematic insofar as it is not at all clear how the Skeptic could report on the equal persuasiveness or credibility of any two conflicting arguments and suspend judgment when at present he is unpersuaded by one but persuaded by the other of those arguments; I will come back to this point later.⁶ For the moment, note that, curiously enough, at the end of the quoted text Svavarsson says that he does not exclude the possibility that the Skeptic may suspend judgment on *p* because the rival arguments bearing on *p* equally persuade him. So suspension of judgment may be attained either (i) when two conflicting arguments persuade the Skeptic to the same degree or (ii) when only one of them persuades him, but he nevertheless experiences both as equally persuasive. If you agree with me that there is something seriously wrong with this account, then the solution must lie elsewhere. In what follows, after explaining what I think this solution is, I will explore more closely Svavarsson's view, trying to show that the texts on which it is based are better explained in light of that solution.

I submit that there are two ways in which an argument may appear persuasive to the Pyrrhonist himself and hence that there are two kinds of argumentative persuasiveness, which can be described as *epistemic* and *psychological* (see Machuca 2009, 116–124). When in his philosophical inquiries the Pyrrhonist examines the conflicting arguments bearing on a given issue, he assesses the truth of the premises and conclusion and the validity of the logical form of each of those arguments with the aim of determining whether any of them reveals the nature of things to us. The result of such an examination is a *de facto* suspension: the Pyrrhonist as a matter of fact finds himself unable to determine whether any one of the arguments he has so far considered is to be preferred because they all appear to him equal in their epistemic persuasiveness or credibility. However, even after having suspended judgment, the Pyrrhonist may still be influenced by one of the conflicting arguments and hence be persuaded by it: a given argument may in fact exert some kind of psychological influence on him. This kind of persuasiveness is not epistemic because it is not a persuasiveness on the basis of which he can make an assertion about the nature of things or about how they really are. Epistemically, rival arguments strike him as equally persuasive, but psychologically, only some may strike him as persuasive. For

⁶ A reviewer has observed that the Skeptic may simply report on what others regard as credible. But the point is that for the Skeptic to suspend judgment on *p*, the reasons for and against *p* must strike *him* as equally credible.

instance, in his inquiry into whether homosexuality is morally right or wrong, the Pyrrhonist finds the conflicting arguments bearing on that subject equal in their epistemic persuasiveness because he has been unable to make up his mind regarding the soundness of any of those arguments, with the result that he is compelled to suspend judgment about the nature of homosexuality. However, if he happened to be raised in a community in which homosexuality is deemed to be morally incorrect by most of its members and is therefore a practice widely condemned, it is possible that thinking about it still triggers in him a negative gut reaction and hence that the arguments against homosexuality still exert some sort of influence upon him that leads him to assent to them but only in a weak or non-dogmatic way.⁷

At this point we should remember that Sextus explicitly distinguishes both between two senses in which one can say that one is persuaded of something and between two corresponding types of assent. Regarding the first distinction, after presenting the three types of persuasive appearance (πιθανή φαντασία) distinguished by the neo-Academics (*PH I* 227–229), Sextus remarks that, when the Pyrrhonists and the neo-Academics say that they are persuaded of certain things (πείθεσθαι τισιν), they are speaking in distinct senses. For the verb πείθεσθαι may mean either (i) “not resisting but simply following (ἔπεσθαι) without strong propensity or inclination” or (ii) “assenting to something by choice and, as it were, sympathy due to strong desire” (*PH I* 230). Whereas the neo-Academics “say, with a strong propensity, that they are persuaded and that something is persuasive,” the Pyrrhonists “say so in the sense of simply yielding (ἔκειν) without inclination” (*PH I* 230). This difference is clear in Greek, since πείθεσθαι + dative means either “obey” or “believe,” the former corresponding to sense (i) above and the latter to sense (ii).

As for the second distinction, in the chapter of *PH* in which he addresses the question whether the Pyrrhonist δογματίζει, Sextus tells us the Pyrrhonist dogmatizes only if dogma means “acquiescing (εὐδοκεῖν) in something; for the Pyrrhonist assents to the affections forced upon him by an appearance – for example, when heated or chilled, he would not say ‘I think I am not heated or chilled’” (*PH I* 13, cf. *PH I* 29). Referring back to this passage, Sextus later remarks that Pyrrhonists do not overturn “the things that, in accordance with a passive appearance, lead us involuntarily (ἀβουλήτως) to assent – and those are the things that appear (τὰ φαινόμενα)” (*PH I* 19, cf. *PH I* 193). This kind of assent

⁷ As an aside, let me point out that, contrary to what a reviewer has claimed, talking about homosexuality is not foreign to Sextus, for he refers to it when reviewing moral disagreements at *PH I* 152 and 159.

consists merely in acknowledging that things presently appear to one in certain ways. By contrast, the Pyrrhonist does not dogmatize if “dogma is assent to one of the non-evident matters investigated in the sciences” (*PH I* 13, cf. *PH I* 16). Thus, sense (i) of the verb *πείθεσθαι* is clearly related to the sense of *δόγμα* that does not imply any assertion about non-evident things, whereas sense (ii) is clearly related to the sense of *δόγμα* rejected by the Pyrrhonist. We can therefore say that, whereas the Pyrrhonist’s assent to what appears persuasive to him is forced and involuntary, the neo-Academic’s rests on a voluntary choice; and whereas the Pyrrhonist assents to his *πάθη* or *φαινόμενα*, the neo-Academic assents to non-evident things, since he affirms that what he says is persuasive is really so (*PH I* 226). Hence, the Pyrrhonist may be involuntarily affected by a given argument in such a way that he is forced to assent to it in the sense of simply yielding to or acquiescing in it, but he is fully aware that this is not enough to epistemically justify his assent to it in the sense of affirming its soundness.⁸

It might be objected that the Pyrrhonist cannot be persuaded by an argument without failing to be in a suspensive state of mind, since to be persuaded of *p* by an argument *A* is to come to believe that *p* is true or likely to be true on the basis of the reasons provided by the premises of *A*. The Pyrrhonist may perhaps “obey” or “acquiesce in” what is stated in the conclusion, but not because he is persuaded by the argument.⁹ For example, he may still be moved by the claim, expressed in the conclusion of an argument, that homosexuality is wrong, but if he is persuaded by the premises and logical form of the argument in question, he cannot but find the claim true or likely to be true. The proponent of this objection thus accepts only what I have described as the epistemic kind of argumentative persuasiveness. To my mind, however, it seems possible that consid-

⁸ The reason why the Pyrrhonist is affected by arguments is that he is a thinking being (*PH I* 24). I take it that the exercise of his natural capability of thinking includes (*pace* Striker 2001, 119 fn. 7) the consideration and the production of arguments in both his philosophical inquiries and his own everyday life, even though he is not committed to their soundness. It also includes the uncommitted use of certain ordinary and philosophical standards of justification. The Pyrrhonist finds himself as a matter of fact having certain intellectual capacities, but this fact by itself does not imply that he endorses the norms of rationality. His use of reason is not therefore the result of an alleged rationalism, but of the way he is hardwired, as it were. One may assume that the specific way his thinking operates is also shaped by the education he received, the cultural context in which he was raised, and his professional training (in the particular case of Sextus, both his philosophical and his medical training). In the literature this interpretation – and its compatibility with the psychological interpretation of the Pyrrhonist’s suspension of judgment in the face of equipollent disagreement – was first proposed in Machuca 2009 and further developed in Machuca 2011b, 2013, and 2015.

⁹ Thanks to Luca Castagnoli for raising this objection.

eration of an argument may exert a certain influence on someone who suspends judgment about whether it is sound or even on someone who denies that it is sound. For a person might find an argument persuasive, in the sense that it has a certain psychological pull on him as he is going through it, even though he is well aware that it is a sophism or that equally strong counterarguments have been put forward, and so even though he refrains from assenting to it. Probably many would prefer not to use terms like “persuasive” and “persuade” in this case, but since Sextus does use the Greek equivalent with two different senses, I fall in with his usage. In addition, *mutatis mutandis*, in a number of modern languages those terms are sometimes used in such a way as to contrast them with “convincing” and “convince”: whereas “persuasive” and “persuade” have an emotional and rhetorical connotation (one may persuade someone that p by means of a weak argument that appeals to, or even manipulates, his emotions), “convincing” and “convince” have a logical or rational connotation (one convinces someone that p by means of an argument because it appeals to evidence that establishes the truth of p). One may imagine someone saying, with perfect sense, “Persuasive argument, but I’m not convinced!”

With the above distinction between two kinds of persuasiveness in mind, let’s go back to Svavarsson’s interpretation. His view on what the equal persuasiveness of arguments consists in is based mainly on an intricate passage at the end of the second book of the *Adversus Dogmaticos* (*AD*)¹⁰ in which Sextus is replying to the objection that the Pyrrhonian arguments against demonstration are self-refuting (*AD* II 463–469). Svavarsson does not quote the passage in full, but given its complexity, it is advisable to do so. Sextus points out that the Pyrrhonists

[473] will say that the argument against demonstration is only persuasive and that at present it persuades them and induces assent (πιθανὸν εἶναι μόνον καὶ πρὸς τὸ παρὸν πείθειν αὐτοὺς καὶ ἐπάγεσθαι συγκατάθεσιν), but that they do not know whether it will also be so in the future due to the variability of human thought. When the answer is of this kind, the Dogmatist will not be able to say anything further. For either he will teach that the argument brought against demonstration is not true, or he will establish this: that it does not persuade the Sceptic. [474] But if he shows the first, he is not in conflict with the Sceptic, since the latter does not assert that that argument is true, but only says that it is persuasive. [475] And if he does the second, he will be rash, wishing to overthrow another person’s affection (πάθος) by argument. For just as no one can, by means of argument, persuade the person who is glad that he is not glad and the person who is in pain that he is not in pain, so neither can one persuade the person who is persuaded that he is not persuaded. [476]

10 The reason for using the title *Adversus Dogmaticos* instead of the standard *Adversus Mathematicos* (*AM*) VII–XI is that using the latter not only is incorrect but also still misleads some into thinking that *AM* I–VI and the five extant books of *AD* form part of a single work.

In addition, if the Sceptics strongly affirmed, with assent, that demonstration is nothing, perhaps they would be dissuaded by the person who teaches that demonstration exists. But as it is, since they make a bare statement of the arguments against demonstration without assenting to them, they are so far from being harmed by those who establish the opposite that, rather, they are helped. [477] For if the arguments introduced against demonstration have remained unrefuted, and the arguments adopted in favor of there being demonstration are in their turn strong, let us agree to suspend judgment, subscribing neither to the former nor to the latter. (*AD* II 473–477)

On the face of it, this passage poses a serious problem for the coherence of Sextus's account of Pyrrhonism. For whereas in several passages Sextus presents the Pyrrhonist's suspension of judgment on (or withholding of assent to) p as the result of the equal persuasiveness or credibility of the conflicting arguments bearing on p ,¹¹ in the present passage he tells us that the Pyrrhonist is persuaded by a given argument – the one against there being demonstration. Although he might not be persuaded by that argument *in the future*, he is *now* persuaded, and hence we have the right to ask: “On what grounds does the Pyrrhonist at present suspend judgment about whether there is demonstration?” Sextus is exposed to an objection that, as we will see in the next section, is similar to the objection that can be leveled against his use of the argument from possible disagreement: given that the equipollence of the conflicting arguments is not *actual*, suspension of judgment cannot be induced. For what one needs for $\epsilon\pi\omicron\chi\eta$ is (i) that at time t_1 both of the contrary arguments A_1 and A_2 appear persuasive to the Pyrrhonist and with the same degree of persuasiveness, *not* (ii) that at t_1 only argument A_1 appears persuasive to him and at t_2 only A_2 appears persuasive to him and both with the same degree of persuasiveness. Otherwise, we seem to get less than promised by the definition of Scepticism:

[A]n ability to set out oppositions ($\delta\acute{\upsilon}\nu\alpha\mu\iota\varsigma$ $\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\iota\theta\epsilon\tau\iota\kappa\acute{\eta}$) among things that appear and things that are thought in any way whatsoever, an ability from which we come, through the equipollence in the opposed things and arguments, first to suspension of judgment, and after that to undisturbedness. (*PH* I 8)

If only one of the opposed arguments appears persuasive to the Pyrrhonist, then it seems that there is in fact no equipollence between them, in which case neither is suspension induced. Even if the $\delta\acute{\upsilon}\nu\alpha\mu\iota\varsigma$ $\acute{\alpha}\nu\tau\iota\theta\epsilon\tau\iota\kappa\acute{\eta}$ were preserved, without $\epsilon\pi\omicron\chi\eta$ Scepticism would crumble.

¹¹ See e.g. *PH* I 196, II 79; *AD* I 444, II 159.

According to Svavarsson (2014, 361), Sextus's remark that the Pyrrhonist may change his mind allows us to understand the equal persuasiveness that induces suspension of judgment in the Pyrrhonist: he is led to *ἐποχή* because, though he is now persuaded that there is no demonstration, he is aware that he might be differently persuaded later on. Granting for the moment that this is the way in which *ἐποχή* is induced in the Pyrrhonist according to the quoted passage, one needs to explain what the opposition between equally persuasive arguments consists in. In other words, what are the two contrary arguments that are taken to be equally persuasive or credible? According to Svavarsson's interpretation, these cannot be two contrary arguments that *both persuade the Pyrrhonist now*. But this is plainly absurd. As already noted, to induce *ἐποχή* one needs two contrary arguments that at the same time strike the Pyrrhonist himself as equally persuasive. One proposal is this: one of the two contrary arguments that appear equally persuasive to the Pyrrhonist is the argument against demonstration while the other is the argument that appeals to the variability of human thought to show that one should not doxastically assent to an argument that at present strikes one as persuasive. Although I think that a proposal along these lines is the correct way to account for other Sextan texts that will be considered later, one need not appeal to it in the present context. For, following the distinction between two kinds of persuasiveness I proposed earlier, I think that in the quoted passage Sextus is not talking of persuasiveness in an epistemic sense, but rather in a merely psychological sense. He observes that, if the Dogmatist intended to establish that the argument against demonstration does not persuade the Skeptic, he would be trying "to overthrow another person's *πάθος* by argument" (*AD II 475*). As we know, a *πάθος* is a state or condition someone or something is in as a result of being affected by an agent. It is precisely because being persuaded is a *πάθος* that it is not possible, by means of argument, to persuade someone that he is not persuaded, just as it is not possible to persuade the person who is glad or in pain that he is not in such states (cf. *AD V 148 f.*, *DL IX 108*). The reason is that a *πάθος* is not the conclusion of an argument the Skeptic accepts as sound, but something that imposes itself on him. In other words, since a *πάθος* is not the result of the Skeptic's holding beliefs about how things are, it is not epistemic. Hence, by describing the state of being persuaded as a *πάθος*, Sextus makes it clear that the kind of argumentative persuasiveness referred to at the beginning of the quoted passage should be interpreted as non-epistemic.¹² The reference, at *AD II 473*, to the variability of human thought can be taken to mean that the factors that influence one's *πάθη* vary with time, so that what non-epistemically persuades us now may not persuade us later

¹² I will come back to this interpretation, and refine it, at the end of the present section.

on (cf. *AD* II 51–54, *DL* IX 94). Of course, the Pyrrhonist's awareness of such variability, as a result of his past experience of it,¹³ may give him a reason for refraining from doxastically assenting to an argument that presently appears persuasive to him. Still, I think that the reason for suspending judgment about whether there is demonstration is the result of the equal epistemic persuasiveness of the specific arguments pro and con there being demonstration. If we do not either (i) assume that the equal argumentative persuasiveness that leads to *ἐποχή* is that between the argument against there being demonstration and the argument based on the awareness of the variability of human thought, or (ii) understand the persuasiveness referred to in the quoted passage as psychological or non-epistemic, then we would be ascribing to Sextus the patently inconsistent claim that the Pyrrhonist suspends judgment or withholds assent even though at present only one argument strikes him as epistemically persuasive and induces him to doxastically assent to it.

If the above is correct, then the assent that, according to *AD* II 473, is induced by the type of persuasiveness in question is non-doxastic and is therefore different from the type of assent mentioned at *AD* II 476, which is the product of the belief that the argument against demonstration is true. The fact that conflicting arguments appear equally persuasive to the Skeptic in an epistemic sense, thereby inducing him to withhold his doxastic assent, does not prevent certain arguments from appearing persuasive to him in a psychological sense, and hence does not prevent him from non-doxastically assenting to them. Hence, the Pyrrhonist non-doxastically or non-dogmatically assents to the argument against demonstration in the sense that he acknowledges that, as a matter of psychological fact, he is presently affected in a certain way: that argument presently appears persuasive to him.

It might be objected that *AD* II 473 can be read as implicitly saying that the argument against demonstration at present persuades the Skeptic *with the same strength as the arguments in favor of demonstration, previously presented, persuade him*. By remarking that he cannot exclude that in the future he might no longer find the argument against demonstration persuasive, Sextus is recognizing that if that happened and if he still found the arguments in favor of demonstration persuasive, he would no longer withhold assent. If Sextus were saying that at present the Skeptic is persuaded only by the argument against demon-

¹³ Although a reviewer has found this reference to past experience reminiscent of the empirical observation defended by the medical Empiricists, I should note that my remark is completely independent of the relation between Pyrrhonism and medical Empiricism. For two different views on such a relation, see Machuca 2008, 40–50; 2011c, 250f., and Spinelli 2008.

stration and so assents to its conclusion, he would be blatantly breaching the Pyrrhonian suspensive attitude.¹⁴ In response, it should be noted, first, that this way of interpreting the reply to the περιτροπή argument given at *AD* II 473 makes it in the end equivalent to the reply given at *AD* II 476 f., which Sextus introduces as an *additional* reply (πρὸς τούτοις). For both replies would focus (implicitly or explicitly) on the strength or the degree of persuasiveness of the arguments against demonstration in comparison with that of the arguments in favor of demonstration, remarking that these conflicting arguments strike the Skeptic as equipollent. Second, at *AD* II 473 Sextus says that the argument against demonstration that presently persuades the Skeptic “induces assent” (ἐπάγεσθαι συγκατάθεσιν). This kind of assent must therefore be different from the assent that, according to *AD* II 476, the Skeptic withholds: while latter is doxastic, the former is not. The proponent of the objection under consideration might attempt to avoid this problem by taking ἐπάγεσθαι συγκατάθεσιν to mean something like “to bring *towards* assent,” which might give the idea that the Skeptic is merely *inclined to* assent, but does not give his assent. However, whether or not such a translation gives that idea, to the best of my knowledge the standard meaning of ἐπάγω, particularly in the middle voice, is “to induce.” Finally, there is no breach of suspension of judgment if one takes the kind of persuasiveness at issue as merely psychological and the related kind of assent as non-doxastic.

Svavarsson (2014, 359 fn. 10) remarks that the claim made at *AD* II 473 f. about the Skeptic being persuaded by an argument seems to be made also, “although not as clearly,” at the end of the discussion of the criterion in the first book of *AD*:

[E]ven if we in fact seem to help to abolish the criterion, we can use for this the appearance at hand (τῇ προχείρῳ φαντασίᾳ), but not as a criterion. When we put forward through the [appearance at hand] the persuasive arguments for there being no criterion that strike us, we do put them forward, but we do not do this with assent owing to the fact that the opposing arguments are equally persuasive. (*AD* I 444)

I think this passage is markedly different from *AD* II 473 f., and unfortunately Svavarsson does not explain what the similarity is supposed to be. For unlike *AD* II 473 f., the present passage refers to the epistemic kind of argumentative persuasiveness both because Sextus says that the arguments pro and con the existence of a criterion appear equally persuasive to him and because he puts forward the persuasive arguments against the criterion without assenting to them. Perhaps Svavarsson thinks that ἡ πρόχειρος φαντασία (which he translates, following Bett

¹⁴ Thanks to Luca Castagnoli for raising this objection.

2005, as “the currently available appearance”) is a reference to the arguments that currently persuade the Skeptic in opposition to the contrary arguments that might persuade him in the future. However, with ἡ πρόχειρος φαντασία Sextus is simply referring to the fact that the arguments against the criterion are those which are now being considered because they have been expounded after the various dogmatic views in favor of there being a criterion (*AD I* 89–260) and are the target of the first dogmatic objection (*AD I* 440) to which Sextus is responding in the quoted passage. It is clear to me that, when Sextus says that the arguments in favor of the criterion strike him as being as persuasive as those against it, the reason is not that he is aware that the former arguments might persuade him or someone else in the future, but rather that as a result of his analysis of them they strike him now in that way.

Svavarsson (2014, 371) also claims that Sextus’s procedure is “most clearly” seen in his exposition of the so-called Ten Modes of Aenesidemus. What Svavarsson has in mind is evidently that, when Sextus contrasts e.g. the way honey appears to him with the way it appears to people with jaundice (*PH I* 101) or the way incest appears to him with the way it appears to the Persians or Egyptians (*PH I* 152), only his own appearances persuade him. If Svavarsson’s interpretation is correct, then once again there is no actual equipollence in the case of most of the conflicts of appearances referred to in the Ten Modes, in which case these modes are ineffective in inducing a wide-ranging suspension of judgment, for the Skeptic is opposing appearances that do not strike him as equally persuasive or credible. The solution consists in arguing, first, that the kind of persuasiveness of the Skeptic’s appearance that honey is sweet or that incest is wrong is psychological, not epistemic. And second, that the correct way of interpreting the cases in which the Skeptic has no access to some of the conflicting appearances referred to in the Ten Modes is to claim that it appears to him that x is F and that it also appears to him that it appears to S that x is not-F, and since the arguments for and against x being F strike him as equal in their epistemic persuasiveness, he finds himself in a state of suspension of judgment.

Towards the end of his essay, Svavarsson offers a clearer explanation of how he conceives of the equipollence or equal persuasiveness of contrary arguments by appealing to the notion of authority:

[A]t the same time as the skeptic is persuaded, he finds himself unable to determine whether the persuading account really is persuasive because the contrary account appears just as persuasive to, *not necessarily the skeptic at that point*, but someone else or the skeptic at another point (even only hypothetically), whose *authority* is equal to the originally persuaded skeptic. [...]

The equal authority of the accounts then forces the skeptic to report that the contrary accounts appear to him equally persuasive, and obliges him to suspend belief in the truth

of either one, even if he is actually (for the moment at least) persuaded by one of them. In a way he believes (just insofar as he is persuaded) and suspends belief at the same time (because the accounts are equally authoritative). (2014, 370 f.)

So two arguments are equipollent or equally persuasive or credible because they are equally authoritative, which in turn means that those who are or could be persuaded by those arguments have the same authority. Unfortunately, Svavarsson does not explain what he understands by “authority,” but he clearly has in mind epistemic authority, in which case he means that the Pyrrhonist has as much reason to trust others (or himself at a later time) as he has to trust himself (now) when it comes to the conflicting arguments that persuade them. Granting for the sake of argument that Svavarsson’s interpretation is correct, it seems clear that the Pyrrhonist needs a reason for thinking that those who are or could be persuaded by an argument that conflicts with the argument that presently persuades him have the same epistemic authority as he. Otherwise, why would he withhold assent to the latter argument? I submit that, in order that suspension be induced, such a reason must take the form of an argument that (i) also conflicts with the argument that presently persuades the Pyrrhonist, and that (ii) currently appears to him as equal in epistemic persuasiveness or credibility to the latter argument. Thus, whenever the Pyrrhonist is at present persuaded by an argument, he brings it into opposition with the argument from equal authority, with the result that he feels compelled to suspend judgment because the two conflicting arguments presently epistemically persuade him to the same degree. Hence, Svavarsson’s appeal to the equal authority of conflicting arguments cannot provide an adequate explanation of the Pyrrhonist’s suspension unless one comes up with a way of constructing an actual conflict between arguments that appear equally persuasive or credible to the Pyrrhonist himself.

I think that Svavarsson comes close to my distinction between two kinds of persuasiveness when he says that the Skeptic “has no means to determine by which account *he ought to be persuaded*, even as [sic] he as a matter of fact may be persuaded by one of the accounts” (2014, 357), or that “the effect of equipollence consists in the skeptic’s being unable to determine by which account he ought to be persuaded, irrespective of which account in fact persuades him” (2014, 358; see also 366). We can interpret that the normative question, “By which argument the Pyrrhonist *ought to be persuaded?*”, concerns the epistemic persuasiveness of arguments, whereas the descriptive observation that he may *as a matter of fact* be persuaded by a given argument concerns the psychological persuasiveness of arguments. Svavarsson fails to realize, however, that the distinction between the normative and the descriptive, or between the epistemic and the psychological, explains away Sextus’s apparently incongruent account of argumentative persua-

siveness, allowing us to retain the claim that the Skeptic is indeed at the same time equally persuaded (in an epistemic sense) by the rival arguments he has so far considered in his inquiries, while still in some cases being persuaded (in a psychological sense) by only one of those arguments.

It might be argued that, in talking about *epistemic* persuasiveness, I overlook the fact that ἐποχή is the state of being *psychologically* unable to choose between conflicting arguments that purport to account for how things really are, and that I should therefore talk instead of two kinds of *psychological* persuasiveness (see Tor 2014, 97 f.). When in my discussion of *AD* II 473–477 I argued that the fact that Sextus describes his being persuaded by the argument against demonstration as a πάθος indicates that the kind of persuasiveness in question is non-epistemic, I might have given the impression that when it comes to epistemic persuasiveness there are no πάθη involved. However, it is clear that, when the Pyrrhonist says that he finds conflicting arguments equal in their epistemic persuasiveness, he is reporting on how as a matter of fact such arguments strike him or how he is affected by them. And ἐποχή, which results from the equipollence of those conflicting arguments, is indeed a πάθος (*PH* I 7): the Pyrrhonist feels compelled to suspend judgment in the face of equipollent disagreement. What should be borne in mind is that the point of *AD* II 475 is to argue that it is not possible, by means of an argument, to persuade the person who is psychologically persuaded by an argument that he is not. The reason is that this psychological influence of an argument upon the Skeptic does not concern the soundness of the argument and so the πάθος in question is not the result of the assessment of the truth of its premises and the validity of its logical form. By contrast, the way in which the Pyrrhonist is affected when conflicting arguments appear to him to be equally persuasive or credible is the result of such an assessment. The persuasiveness in question is epistemic because it concerns the question whether what appears persuasive to one is true or likely to be true and hence whether one should believe it (cf. Machuca 2009, 116). When I talk of “epistemic” persuasiveness, what I therefore mean is merely that, with regard to the *epistemic credentials* of the contending arguments he examines, the Pyrrhonist finds these arguments on a par in their persuasiveness. Hence, nothing of what I say implies that when he finds conflicting arguments equal in their epistemic persuasiveness the Pyrrhonist is not affected in a given way and that the resulting suspension is not an involuntary state of mind in which he in fact finds himself.

3 Possible Disagreement and Equipollence

In *PH* Sextus makes use of an argument from possible disagreement that is designed to set out an opposition and induce *ἐποχή* whenever he is confronted with an argument on a given topic to which at present he cannot oppose a countervailing argument on the same topic. Sextus offers five versions of the argument in question (*PH* I 33f., 89, 143; II 40f. [cf. II 61]; III 233f.), but I will limit myself to discussing the first occurrence of the argument because it is the clearest.¹⁵ The passage in question is found in the chapter that presents the modes leading to *ἐποχή* (*PH* I 31–35). Sextus points out that there are different kinds of oppositions, one of which is that between present things and past or future things. He gives the following example of this type of opposition:

Whenever someone propounds to us an argument that we are not able to refute, we say to him: “Just as before the birth of the founder of the school to which you belong, the argument of the school, which is sound, was not yet apparent, but was nonetheless really there in nature, so likewise it is also possible that the argument opposing the one you are propounding now is really there in nature, but that it is not yet apparent to us, so that we should not yet assent to what now seems to be a strong argument.” (*PH* I 33f.)

According to this argument, even though at the present time one cannot refute an argument on a given topic put forward by a Dogmatist, one should nonetheless remain cautious and refrain from assenting to it because one cannot rule out the possibility that, in the future, one might discover a contrary argument on the same topic that will appear to be as epistemically persuasive as the argument that is currently under consideration. The disagreement between the conflicting arguments is not actual but merely possible.¹⁶

Now, at the beginning of his paper, when presenting his main interpretation, Svavarsson briefly refers to the argument from possible disagreement in these terms:

The skeptic might even find it impossible to decide whether he ought to be persuaded by one account because of the thought that one day a better account might be advanced and he might be persuaded by that [...] In this case his suspension, based as always on equal per-

¹⁵ For an analysis of all the relevant passages, see Machuca 2011a, 153–157.

¹⁶ Contrary to what a reviewer has claimed, the argument from possible disagreement does not rest on “faith” in inductive inference. Apart from the fact that talking about “faith” in relation to Pyrrhonian skepticism is deeply problematic, it should be noted that Sextus explicitly attacks induction at *PH* II 204. See Machuca 2011a, 153 fn. 13.

suasiveness, does not arise because he actually is equally persuaded by contrary accounts; he just thinks that he might be persuaded at a later point. (2014, 357)

This reading of the argument from possible disagreement is of course in line with Svavarsson's general interpretation of the way in which *ἐποχή* is induced in the Pyrrhonist in the face of equally persuasive arguments, and so creates the same problem for the coherence of Sextus's account of Pyrrhonism. The passages that expound the argument in question refer to merely possible disagreements that, as such, are not actual disagreements between apparently equipollent positions. Even though the Skeptic cannot at present refute an argument, he nonetheless suspends his judgment because it is possible that in the future either someone will come up with an argument that appears as persuasive as the argument he cannot refute at present or, according to other versions of the argument, he will discover an equally strong argument that has already been put forward but of which he has not yet heard. Contrary to what Svavarsson says, on his reading there is no real equipollence or equal persuasiveness of opposing arguments simply because one of the arguments is currently missing. At *PH* I 34 Sextus explicitly tells us that he is opposing a present argument to a future argument that is presently unavailable in the sense that it is not apparent to him. It seems, then, that he should assent to the argument he cannot refute at present instead of suspending judgment.

My solution to this problem consists in arguing that equipollent disagreement is actual because what is being opposed to the current argument in favor of *p* that the Skeptic is considering is not an equally persuasive argument against *p* that might be available in the future, but the argument from possible disagreement itself. Since the two arguments strike him as equal in their epistemic persuasiveness, the Skeptic suspends judgment on *p* (see Machuca 2011a, 158f.). It would make no sense for the Skeptic to set out an opposition between an argument whose premises and conclusion are available to an argument whose premises and conclusion are not available but might be so in the future. If my interpretation is correct, then by appealing to the argument from possible disagreement Sextus is (albeit not explicitly, I concede) setting out an actual opposition between two arguments that, *pace* Svavarsson, at present equally persuade him in an epistemic sense.¹⁷

¹⁷ I am grateful to Luca Castagnoli and the two reviewers for the journal for their critical remarks on a previous version of this paper.

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