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Is Pyrrhonism Psychologically Possible?

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If we are to believe what the history books tell us, there was once a group of philosophers—not unlike us, save for the fact that they lived long ago—who really were skeptics, actual flesh and blood skeptics. These were not, we are told, philosophers who merely found certain skeptical arguments troubling (as Descartes did), nor were they merely philosophers who thought certain skeptical arguments were cogent (as Hume did): No, these people *were* skeptics, in the very same sense in which other philosophers *were* Epicureans or *were* Stoics.

Now I think many will be inclined to suppose that we need not perform any elaborate historical investigations in order to justify a belief that such creatures never existed, for the simple reason that what is described above is not psychologically possible, and this is something to which we can be privy without doing any external investigations. There never were philosophers who really did suspend judgment about all non-evident matters¹ because doing so is *psychologically impossible*. Even if there are skeptical arguments, which are cogent, we could never believe in accordance with the conclusion of such an argument, by suspending judgment in response to it.² So if we think the skeptics claim to have done so, then we are either (i) misinterpreting them or (ii) they were lying—or, perhaps, (more civilly) “jesting.”³

The real evidence for the objection is introspective. Think, for example, of the first skeptical argument you heard in Introduction to Philosophy, probably something from Descartes or Hume. However theoretically convincing such an argument may have seemed to you at the time, however irrefutable it may have seemed, believing its conclusion was out of the question. Many of you might still think that there has not yet been a really convincing *refutation* of skepticism, but no one here (I suspect) believes the skeptical conclusion. Raising oneself from the level of *epistemic* doubts⁴ to actual *psychological* suspension of belief just doesn't seem possible.

If philosophy cannot justify our beliefs, then so much the worse for philosophy. It's not as if we are able to give them up. “Nature,” as Hume once said, “is always too strong for principle.”⁵ Even if there were cogent skeptical arguments, we couldn't be skeptics in any interesting sense; our nature makes us incorrigible dogmatists.

So how could there have been a group of philosophers who said they really were skeptics? How could they have claimed to suspend judgment about all non-evident matters which were presented to them and to have gone their way *adoxastōs* (without belief) by (as they said) “following the appearances” (*PH* 1.23)? That is the question I would like to answer.

1.1 The Scope of Pyrrhonian *Epochē*

Before we can decide our answer to the question “Is Pyrrhonism psychologically possible?” we will first need to decide what *Pyrrhonism* amounts to.⁶ More specifically, we need to decide how to understand the *scope* of the skeptic's *epochē*.⁷ This, as the reader may know, is a topic of scholarly debate nowadays. Some contemporary historians, led

by Michael Frede,⁸ have argued that Sextus only claims to suspend judgment about theoretical claims—e.g., the abstruse principles of Aristotelian nature philosophy—but that so far as ordinary or everyday claims are concerned, the skeptics believe with the masses. According to such interpreters, we are led into thinking that Sextus makes impossible claims only if we *misinterpret* him: Properly interpreted, he makes no such claims.

Surely, if Frede is right, Pyrrhonism is psychologically possible, for the scope of the skeptic's suspension would be quite local, and this very specificity would probably suffice to assure us of its psychological possibility. In general, our assessments of the psychological possibility of skeptical suspension of judgment tend to be largely a function of the *scope* of that suspension, insofar as we tend to think specificity increases (and generality decreases) the likelihood of psychological possibility. But there is also an additional reason for thinking that Frede's version of Pyrrhonian *epochē* is psychologically possible, and that has to do with the actual content of the claims at issue. It is just obvious (I think) that it is relatively easy to suspend judgment about abstruse theoretical claims of the sort Frede has in mind. So, a combination of specificity and specific content makes a Frede-style suspension seem very plausible.

Fortunately or unfortunately, I myself cannot believe that there is adequate evidence for the Frede interpretation in the extant texts, but for my purposes here I want to leave my dispute with Frede aside.⁹ I would instead rather consider what I take to have been the historically more influential interpretation, which is currently championed by Myles Burnyeat.¹⁰ According to this latter interpretation, the skeptic claims to suspend judgment about *all* claims about how things are—both theoretical and everyday.¹¹ On this interpretation, any claim about how things *are*, as opposed to how they merely *seem* to be, is a matter about which the skeptic would suspend judgment (*PH* 1.19–20, 22). And, obviously, claims about how things are will include many perfectly ordinary claims, such as the perfectly ordinary claim that “The honey is sweet”—‘Sure,’ the skeptic will say, “it *seems* sweet” (*PH* 1.19–20). It is this more radical interpretation of the scope of Pyrrhonian *epochē* that raises the question whether suspension of belief on such a scale is even possible. I want to consider the question whether Pyrrhonism, *thus construed*, is psychologically possible.

Hume famously thought not. Hume agreed with Sextus that there are unanswerable skeptical arguments, but Hume found many of these very same arguments to be, quite literally, incredible—unbelievable. In a famous passage we are given what we might (somewhat playfully) call “Cleanthes' Criterion”:

Whether your skepticism be as absolute and sincere as you pretend, we shall learn by and by, when the company breaks up; we shall then see whether you go out at the door or the window . . . (*Dialogues* p.5)

The implication here is as obvious as the rhetoric is delicious.¹² Sextus, however, seems to proceed as if the skeptical arguments can indeed move us, as if we can be led to believe the skeptical conclusion(s), and subsequently go our way *adoxastōs*.

Here is how Sextus describes the path: The Pyrrhonian skeptic inquires, questions, etc. and is led to *isostheneia* (the equal balancing of the considerations for and the considerations against some matter in question). Faced with this equal balancing of considerations for and against, the matter seems undecidable; the matter's undecidability

then leads the skeptic to *epochē* (suspension of judgment). Then, “as if by chance,” (*PH* 1.29) he achieves *ataraxia* (tranquility, freedom from disturbance, peacefulness of mind):

[A]s regards belief the Skeptic’s goal is *ataraxia*, and . . . as regards things that are unavoidable it is having moderate *pathē*. For when the Skeptic set out to philosophize with the aim of assessing his *phantasia* —that is, of determining which are true and which are false so as to achieve *ataraxia* — he landed in a controversy between positions of equal strength, and, being unable to resolve it, he suspended judgment. But while he was thus suspending judgment there followed by chance the sought-after *ataraxia* as regards belief. (*PH* 1.25–27, Mates translation)

Now, if the arguments did *not* guide our cognitive life, then skeptical arguments would not be able to produce *isostheneia* (equal balancing), undecidability, or *epochē* (suspension of judgment) and the skeptic would not fortuitously achieve *ataraxia* (tranquility). So, *epochē*, the causal precondition of *ataraxia*, if it is to be achieved by *arguments*, requires that we can be *moved* by skeptical arguments.¹³

Well, we may say, so much the worse for the Pyrrhonist’s position. We know that skeptical arguments cannot move us; therefore, we know that the Pyrrhonist’s position is indefensible. Q.E.D. *That* move—*that* antiskeptical response—is precisely the one I hope to cut off.

1.2 The Role of Pyrrhonian *Epochē*: Skepticism as a Eudaimonistic Ethic

Is it really possible that the human constitution has changed so much in two millennia that what was once possible for humans at the time of Sextus is no longer possible for us now? That seems quite unlikely to me. So either Pyrrhonism was possible then and is still possible now, or it was impossible then and it is still impossible now. If we take the latter approach (impossible then, impossible now), what shall we say of Sextus (if we are using the Burnyeat interpretation)?

One thing we might say, which I am disinclined to take very seriously, is that Sextus was being disingenuous. (Here we have the ‘liars or jesters’ option.) The skeptics claimed to suspend all belief, the objection goes, but they knew that was impossible. Perhaps this was some sort of grand philosophical joke on their part. Perhaps the ancient skeptics were just clever hooligans, drawn to the antiworkaday lifestyle of philosophy—a band of Socratic hippies.

Unfortunately for such an interpretation, the extant sources and our knowledge of how the other schools interacted with the skeptics make a spoof of such immense proportions seem rather implausible. Really the only thing going for the hypothesis of insincerity is the sheer, titillating appeal of the proportions of the deception—it would be like they fooled philosophical posterity itself, like learning of an ancient tribe living hidden in a secret society right smack in the middle of Central Park.

But if Sextus is not a liar or a mere jester, how do we account for his claims about the life of a skeptic? That is, if we accept that the human constitution cannot have changed so much as to make what was possible for Sextus *impossible* for us, *how can we make sense of Sextus*? My own view is that the suspension of all belief that Sextus claims to be definitive of a true skeptic should be viewed as definitive of the skeptic’s *ethically ideal type*.¹⁴

First, recall that skepticism was essentially a view of the good life, a eudaimonistic account, in direct competition with other such accounts. Think for a moment of the claims made on behalf of stoicism. Stoic writings tell us that the *Sage* is not worried over things beyond his control, that he controls his emotions and serenely accepts what must be, that he wishes things to be just exactly as they are, and so on. Now ask yourself, did any *actual* Stoic—or better yet, the bulk of them—ever really live that way? Answer: Probably not. The “Sage” is an ideal character type for the Stoics, in very much the same way other ethical traditions have their own ideal types. To take another example, if one were to say “A Christian loves his neighbor and leaves judgment for God alone,” one would not take this to mean that someone who failed to do so was not a Christian—or else there would be few, if any, Christians.¹⁵ Rather, a Christian is someone who *subscribes* to that ideal and *aspires* to reach it. What makes one a participant in this sort of ethical tradition is your *endorsing* its ideal type and *aspiring* to it. The “Christian,” like the “Sage,” is an idealized character type. So, too, I believe that when Sextus refers to the “Skeptic” he has this sort of thing in mind. The Skeptic makes no determinations (*PH* 1.197), neither affirming nor denying anything (*PH* 1.192–193), the Skeptic suspends all belief (*PH* 1 *passim*): That is, those who consider themselves *skeptics* (small “s”) aspire to be like the character (quite possibly entirely or mostly fictional) to whom such sayings refer. Thus, although there were real skeptics, there might not have been a “Skeptic” in the ancient world at all.

As some initial confirmation of this line of thought consider what Sextus has to say about the skeptical “slogans” (*phōnē*),¹⁶ some of which were mentioned above in characterizing the “Skeptic.” Sextus tells us that while these slogans may *imply* or *suggest* a form of dogmatism, they should not be taken as licensing any such implications or suggestions. He tells us, e.g., that the slogan “To every argument an equal argument is opposed” (*PH* 1.202 ff.) might be interpreted as “To every argument let us oppose an opposite argument!” That is, it ought to be read as an *exhortation* rather than as a declaration (*PH* 1.204–205). This allows the skeptic to deftly sidestep certain kinds of self-refutation charges of the form: *That* slogan is a belief; therefore, you have a belief; therefore, you are refuted. My suggestion is that the utterance “The Skeptic has no beliefs”—which plays the same role, I think, as the slogans, viz. giving a characterization of the “Skeptic”—should be read in the same spirit—not, that is, as a declaration, but as an *exhortation*: “Let us have no beliefs!”¹⁷ If so, certain kinds of self-refutation arguments can be sidestepped, and, more importantly for present purposes, our eyes will be opened to the possibility that this otherwise very dubious declaration (“The Skeptic has no beliefs”) is a *call to action*, not a victory speech.¹⁸

But does *that* show that Pyrrhonism is psychologically possible? Wouldn’t that be the same as arguing that Sextus *didn’t* think skepticism was believable (i.e., there were skeptics, but no “Skeptics”)? Well, not exactly. I think—consistently with what has been said so far—that Sextus in fact thought skepticism was believable, or, in other words, that he thought we really could achieve *epochē*. So what I need now is an account of how Sextus could have reasonably thought *that*.

I have three main, closely related reasons for thinking that Sextus did indeed accept the believability of skepticism (1, 2, & 3 below). The first is that (1) the Pyrrhonists do not appear to have ever developed what is now known as External World Skepticism. While the Pyrrhonists did claim to withhold belief about *all non-evident matters falling under their consideration* (*PH* 1.199, 200, 202–203), it does not appear

that the existence of a mind-independent world—or, more concretely, the mind-independent existence of the earth or my body—ever fell under their consideration. We might put it this way: Pyrrhonian *epochē* is *distributively* universal, but *collectively* non-universal.¹⁹ They do claim to suspend beliefs about *all non-evident matters falling under their consideration*, but (purely as a matter of fact) not all non-evident matters are matters that occurred to them or their dogmatic opponents. It seems that the Problem of the External World has a Modern (Cartesian) origin, and simply was not formulated at the time Sextus wrote.²⁰

This does not mean that Pyrrhonism was only attribute or property skepticism as opposed to existence skepticism. *Nor* does it mean that empirical beliefs of the sort problematized by Cartesian skepticism were not ever subjected to Pyrrhonian critique (we have already seen examples of just such empirical beliefs being critiqued). It just means that there was no *general* worry about *all such cases* taken together as regards their *mind-independent existence*.

Now since I find suspension of belief about the mind-independent existence of the earth or my body more radical than suspension of belief about the honey's sweetness (*PH* 1.20) or the tower's true shape (*PH* 1.32, 118), I find Pyrrhonian *epochē*, in one sense at least, less radical (and, hence, more plausibly believable) than External World Skepticism. Thus, if in determining the psychological possibility of (Sextus') Pyrrhonism you are trying to imagine suspending belief about the existence of your body, you're considering the wrong sort of case. And considering the wrong sorts of cases could lead us to foreclose on a live possibility.²¹

Still, even if Pyrrhonism is in some sense less radical than External World Skepticism, it seems just as global in scope—perhaps more so. Isn't this extraordinary scope itself sufficient to assure us that Pyrrhonism is not believable? I don't think so and here's why. Although both External World Skepticism and Pyrrhonism induce very wide-ranging doubts,²² they do so in entirely different ways. External World Skepticism hopes to traverse the gap between epistemic doubts and actual psychological suspension with a single argument (typically). In contrast, Pyrrhonism deploys particular arguments for each particular claim. (2) Where Descartes went, as he told us, right for the foundations, Sextus moves about piecemeal.²³ Moreover, one employing the piecemeal approach is highly likely to be encouraged by past successful applications of the method in particular cases: Every individual success would be seen as counting in favor of the method.²⁴

Furthermore, (3) when the goal of Pyrrhonism (*ataraxia* = tranquility) is borne in mind, it is very plausible to believe that skepticism could be a great success for me *qua* Pyrrhonist, *even if I had only found piecemeal and incomplete success with the method*.

For these reasons, I believe the Pyrrhonists probably met with some success in approximating their ideal type. It seems likely that many Pyrrhonists succeeded in suspending belief about all sorts of particular matters while still falling short of complete suspension. Moreover, insofar as Pyrrhonism was essentially a eudaimonistic account, the skeptic might have been able to achieve a fairly satisfactory state of *ataraxia*, *without completing his suspension of all belief*. Perhaps a general aloofness and noncommittal attitude, combined with the suspension of certain *particularly problematic beliefs* would be enough to leave the skeptic fairly well off—fairly tranquil, that is. In such a case, there is every reason to believe that such a skeptic would see his skepticism as a *great success*, and be more inclined to focus on his thus-far-achieved degree of *ataraxia* than on

those matters he had not yet suspended belief over. Indeed, it is plausible to believe that the success he had met with would offer him encouragement that future successes might be in the offing.

1.3 Particularly Problematic Beliefs and *Ataraxia*

In this penultimate section, I would like to amplify one of the reflections from the foregoing section, which I believe speaks rather directly to the plausibility of my general interpretation of Sextus. I have in mind the claim that certain *particularly problematic beliefs* might play a special role in coming to understand the skeptic's position. In particular, I think that reflecting on certain *particularly problematic beliefs* can shed light on the relation between *epochē* and *ataraxia*—i.e., on how or why *ataraxia* is found to follow *epochē* as a shadow follows a body.

This is my proposal. The skeptic claims that, somehow, suspending judgment—living *adoxastōs*—produces tranquility (*ataraxia*). This claim can seem rather hard to understand, especially if we think paradigmatically of beliefs such as “The honey is sweet” or “The tower is round.” But if we move to consider certain other beliefs, the claim gains considerable plausibility. Let me take three sorts of illustrative cases: (1) beliefs about death and the afterlife,²⁵ (2) beliefs about religion more generally,²⁶ and (3) beliefs about ethics or, more generally, value theory.²⁷ Each of (1–3) can easily be imagined to produce disturbance (*tarachē*, the opposite of *ataraxia*) or troubledness in a human life: Maybe I (or my wife, or mother, or best friend) will die and go to a place of torment, or maybe god (or the gods) will curse my existence, or maybe they already have, since poverty (laziness, sickness, etc.) is thought to be an evil and I am poor (lazy, sick, etc.). Were one to regard such possibilities as of no more concern than whether the number of stars is even or odd²⁸—as a matter of no consequence at all, that is—it seems to me one's life might well be less troubled.

Now although it is not true that Sextus consistently or explicitly privileges the importance of *epochē* concerning such matters as regards the attainment of *ataraxia*, our intuitive sense that such a connection is plausible can be supplemented by some brief, but revealing remarks from *PH*. In the courses of the three books that comprise *PH*, there are only two passages where Sextus makes any attempt to try to explain *why* one might plausibly think *ataraxia* will follow *epochē*. Since the second of these two passages (*PH* 3.235–237) merely repeats the claims of the first (*PH* 1.27–30), it could reasonably be said that only one remark in the entire work (or only one twice-remarked remark) bears on the question. In that remark, Sextus tries to explain *how* the skeptic's eschewal of ethics (or, perhaps, value theory in general) will conduce to *ataraxia*:

[T]he person who believes that something is by nature good or bad is constantly upset; when he does not possess the things that seem to be good, he thinks he is being tormented by things that are by nature bad, and he chases after the things he supposes to be good; then, when he gets these, he falls into still more torments because of irrational and immoderate exultation, and, fearing any change, he does absolutely everything in order not to lose the things that seem to him good. But the person who takes no position as to what is by nature good or bad neither avoids nor pursues intensely. As a result, he achieves *ataraxia*. (*PH* 1.27–28, Mates translation)

I repeat, it is in this passage, and *this passage only* (if we discount its repetition), that Sextus addresses the issue in *PH*.²⁹ Thus, our intuitive sense that such matters are more important, supplemented by *PH* 1.27–30 and 3.235–237, can be taken as at least plausible—if admittedly far from overwhelming—evidence that these matters are more “at issue” in the attainment of *ataraxia*, and, therefore, more centrally connected to the success of Pyrrhonism (i.e. the success of its search for *ataraxia*).

It is important to note that I am *not proposing a scope restriction on epochē*. I am not, that is, saying that the Pyrrhonian skeptic only sought to achieve *epochē* with respect to these particularly problematic beliefs. I still maintain that the skeptic seeks *epochē* about all non-evident matters falling under his consideration. But he seeks this *epochē* for a reason, viz. *ataraxia* as regards belief. Focusing on certain particularly problematic beliefs helps clarify why he might have thought *ataraxia* might follow *epochē*, and it also helps us see how his skepticism might well produce some measure of *ataraxia*. Thus, such focus helps us understand how Sextus could have thought his approach was promising and offered hope of ever greater, ever more complete success.

If these reflections are correct, then we have a way of understanding Sextus’ claims about the life of a skeptic without limiting the scope of *epochē* or supposing Sextus to be liar/jester. Sextus was outlining a eudaimonistic account aimed at the attainment of *ataraxia*. Since *epochē* has been found to result in *ataraxia* (“as if by chance”), the skeptic pursues *epochē*—that is, he pursues the ideal state of being a “Skeptic.” To be sure, he does not arrive at that *ideal state*, though he may well achieve or approximate *ataraxia* as regards belief during his *pursuit* of it.³⁰

1.4 The Psychological Possibility of Pyrrhonism

So, what do I say to my guiding question? *Is Pyrrhonism psychologically possible?* Any straightforward, uncompromising response seems out of place here, but this much is true: Pyrrhonism seems to me no less psychologically possible than many, many other ethical theories.³¹ To be sure, the Pyrrhonian *ethically ideal state* may not be—indeed, almost certainly is not—psychologically achievable. Thus, if we interpret the question of Pyrrhonism’s psychological possibility as equivalent to the question of the psychological possibility of complete Pyrrhonian *epochē*, then we must say Pyrrhonism is not psychologically possible. But I see no decisive reasons for so interpreting our guiding question. To note the unachievability of the Pyrrhonian’s ethically ideal state amounts to a very general criticism of any ethical view that is inherently *aspirational*. Any view, that is, which aims at a state of *self-realization* (in the admirable Greek sense) that is not actually achievable. A philosopher’s reach ought to exceed his grasp—or, at any rate, if it ought not do so, this is hardly a unique flaw in Pyrrhonism.

I think we ought to admit that the *pursuit* of such an ideal state is indeed psychologically possible, and I think it is plausible to suppose that a Pyrrhonian might well achieve or approximate his true end, *ataraxia*, while thus pursuing, and incompletely exemplifying, *epochē*. So I see no good reason not to say that Pyrrhonism was, and *arguably* remains today,³² psychologically possible, though I concede that this is only so if we are willing to countenance partial success within an aspirational tradition as indicative of its success—as surely, I think, we should. If one allows a central role to *aspiration* in value theory, one might still strive to live the life *adoxastōs*. Whether that is a life we ought to consider living is, I think, an important question, though not one I have

addressed. But that living such a life, that striving for the ideals that give form to such a life, is possible—humanly possible—I think we must say it is.³³

NOTES

- ¹ The Pyrrhonian skeptic only claims to suspend judgment concerning matters that are *non-evident*. The interpretation of the term “non-evident” is, thus, related to the issue of scope addressed in the next section: All parties agree that the skeptic suspends judgment about non-evident matters; the dispute is over *which matters* are, according to the Pyrrhonian, “non-evident.” See Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. by Benson Mates as *The Skeptic Way: Sextus Empiricus’s Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1.13–15, 16–17. (The *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* will hereafter be cited as *PH*. This is the common scholarly abbreviation for the work; the designation derives from its Greek title, *Pyrrōneioi Hypotyposēis*.)
- ² In order to further clarify some of my common locutions we might consider (1) whether Pyrrhonism is believable, (2) whether Pyrrhonian suspension of judgment (*epochē*) is psychologically possible, (3) whether Pyrrhonian considerations can move us, or (4) whether Pyrrhonism (simpliciter) is psychologically possible. I will treat the question (1) whether Pyrrhonism is believable as (for present purposes) equivalent in meaning to (2) and argue that (3) bears on both (1) and (2). The core meaning of (1–3) concerns whether Pyrrhonism can be more than a mere intellectual curiosity, abstractly entertained: Can it have an effect on us? If so, how great an effect? As for (4)—my title question—I hope to use my reflections on (1–3) to position us to answer it. (4), I will argue, is not (or *need not be taken to be*) straightforwardly equivalent to (1) or (2), though it is closely related to (3). I owe my awareness of the need for this clarificatory note to Katheryn Doran and Derek Turner.
- ³ Indictments falling under (ii) are as old as Pyrrhonism I suppose. Such indictments were revived in the Modern period and can be found sprinkled throughout even the most skeptically sympathetic Moderns, e.g. (and *especially*) Hume. For instance, in Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Richard Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998), the character Cleanthes tell us that, although he declines to say the skeptics are “a sect of liars,” he nonetheless “affirm[s] (I hope without offence) that they are a sect of jesters or railliers” (Part 1, 9). The “jester” theme also appears in Hume’s discussion of Pyrrhonism in Section 12, Part 2, 160 of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, in *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 3rd ed., ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge & P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975)—I take that as confirmation that Cleanthes speaks for Hume in the passage cited.
- ⁴ As some have correctly noted, “doubt” is not—psychologically—characteristic of the Pyrrhonian skeptic—he is not a “doubter,” as Mates puts it (*The Skeptic Way* (cited in note 1, above), 30). Nonetheless, he may have doubts in my *epistemic* sense. As I intend for “epistemic doubts” to be understood here, it is consistent with one’s thinking that the issue about which one has “epistemic doubts” is incoherent. For example, I could have “epistemic

doubts” in my sense about a set of religious practices I find to be simply incoherent. One might say instead that one has “epistemic worries” about such issues to avoid the appearance of *comprehension* that “doubt” normally implies—one must first conceive the issue(s), then be dubious. But “worries” sounds too weak to my ear, and “epistemic grounds for suspension of belief” sounds too wordy. On this issue, see Mates, *The Skeptic Way*, 30–32.

⁵ *Enquiry*, 160.

⁶ I will assume the reader’s familiarity with the basic shape of the position.

⁷ The Greek word *epochē* means ‘suspension of judgment.’ I will treat ‘judgment’ and ‘belief’ as equivalent, and I will treat each as entailing a relatively stable attitude of ‘taking-true’ some proposition about how things are.

⁸ See Michael Frede’s “The Skeptic’s Beliefs” and “The Skeptic’s Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge,” both contained in his *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 179–200 and 201–222, respectively. In his recent book *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5 ff. Robert Fogelin casts his lot with Frede.

⁹ Granting that Pyrrhonism is psychologically possible on a Frede interpretation of the scope of Pyrrhonian *epochē*, I want to consider whether it is also psychologically possible on the Burnyeat interpretation. I can make the necessary arguments without deciding which interpretation is the most historically accurate one. (Though, as my text confesses, I side with Burnyeat.)

¹⁰ See Burnyeat’s “Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?” in *Doubt and Dogmatism*, ed. M. Schofield, M. Burnyeat, and J. Barnes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 20–53 and “The Sceptic in His Place and Time” in *Philosophy and History*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 225–254. The Burnyeat interpretation has also been defended by Jonathan Barnes, “The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 28 (1982), 1–29. Barnes allows that there is some evidence for the Frede interpretation, but insists that the “general tenor of *PH* is . . . indubitably rustic” [“rustic” here refers to the Burnyeat-style interpretation] (*ibid.*, 18). (All the papers referred to in this note and note 8 have been conveniently collected in a volume edited by Burnyeat and Frede: *The Original Sceptics: A Controversy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).)

¹¹ On *this* interpretation, the notion of “non-evident” is cashed out in terms of “being about how things *are*, as opposed to how they merely (non-epistemically) *seem* or *appear* to be.” See *PH* 1.13–15, 16–17, 19–20, 21–22, *Adversus Mathematicos (M)*, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), Vol. 3: 11.18–19 and Burnyeat’s “Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?”, 25–26, 46–47. Thus, something is a “non-evident matter” if and only if it

concerns “how things are.” (N.B.: I no longer believe this view is completely correct. Neither does Burnyeat. However, since both he and I continue to think that the completely correct view leaves the distinction between what the skeptic will accept (how things non-epistemically seem) and what the skeptic will reject (beliefs about how things are) untouched, I will pass over the troublesome task of making the appropriate adjustments vis-à-vis the notion of the “non-evident.” For Burnyeat’s adjustments, see “The Sceptic in His Place and Time,” p.229–231, 243–244.)

¹² I see no reason why the Pyrrhonist would, should, or must bite the bullet and claim to “go out at the window.” Even though we have stories of roughly that pattern about Pyrrho himself (whose friends, we are told, had to follow him about to prevent him from walking off cliffs!), we should share Hegel’s judgment that such stories were in all likelihood concocted by the skeptics’ opponents to parody their position. (For the stories, see “The Life of Pyrrho” in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* [hereafter, DL] by Diogenes Laertius, trans. R. D. Hicks (London: William Heinemann, 1925), vol. 2, book 9.62; for Hegel’s assessment, see his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), Vol. 2: 336.)

The only developed version of Pyrrhonism that we have (Sextus) answers this sort of worry with the four-fold regimen (*PH* 1.23–24; cf. *M* 11.162–167 and DL 9.108), and Diogenes himself reports that Aenesidemus—an important Pyrrhonian skeptic, responsible, we believe, for the Ten Modes—denied these stories were true of Pyrrho (DL 9.62). Moreover, if, as many suppose, Pyrrho traveled to India with Alexander (DL 9.61, 63 and Everard Flintoff’s “Pyrrho and India,” *Phronesis* 25 (1980), 88–108) and lived to be nearly 90 years old (DL 9.62), such stories seem far-fetched indeed—to have friends such as Pyrrho would have needed to stay alive would be a wonder indeed! We should therefore not take Pyrrhonism to be committed to biting the bullet in response to Cleanthes/Hume. (Interestingly, Hume’s own account of Custom or Habit seems strikingly similar to the four-fold regimen of Sextus. So Hume had the right answer to the worry, but refused to allow the Pyrrhonists to use it!)

Regarding the Humean or non-Humean basis of Cleanthes’ Criterion, some readers have wondered whether *Cleanthes* speaks for *Hume* in the passage cited in the text. For my own part, I believe each of the three characters speaks for Hume at various points in the *Dialogues*, and I am convinced Cleanthes speaks for Hume in this instance. My position is further strengthened by the comments made, in Hume’s own voice, in the *Enquiry*, Section 12, Part 2, see esp. 158–159, 160. (In this connection, see again note 3 above.)

¹³ As the text indicates, I believe that *epochē* is meant to be induced by consideration of *arguments*. It might be argued, however, that all that is really necessary is that we are brought to *epochē* by whatever route works, and such a route need not involve arguments or at any rate not *good* arguments (cf. *PH* 3.280–281). By my lights, however, Sextus certainly appears to give arguments, and judging from the difficulty philosophical posterity has had in answering him many of these appear to be *good* arguments. Moreover, even if we judge that the arguments Sextus offers are not good, I would still claim that the prospective Pyrrhonian must judge them to be good if he is to use them to reach *epochē* in the manner Sextus suggests. For a

decidedly less cognitivist reading of Pyrrhonism, see Michael Williams' provocative paper "Scepticism Without Theory," *Review of Metaphysics* 41 (1988), 547–588.

- ¹⁴ Suspension of belief is not itself the ethical ideal, of course; *ataraxia* is (*PH* 1.12, 25–30, 215). But since *ataraxia* turns out to follow suspension (*epochē*) "as a shadow follows a body" (*PH* 1.29), the *ethically ideal type or person* for the Pyrrhonians suspends belief. They aim to be like the ethically ideal type. In the same way, the Stoics don't *directly* aim at tranquility; instead they aim at wanting things to be just as they are, and so on, since this, they believe, produces tranquility. And, more generally, as the Paradox of Hedonism shows, one is misguided in seeking some goals (e.g. happiness) directly: You don't try to be happy; you do things that (you think) are likely to lead to happiness.
- ¹⁵ One might wonder whether there is some *threshold* concerning degree of conformity to the ideal state beyond which one counts as, e.g., a Christian, but below which one does not. For my own part, I am not at all convinced (though I won't deny) that the issue concerning such ethical cases has anything much to do with your own *achievements* vis-à-vis the ideal state. I suspect that the only real objection to your claim to be, e.g., a Christian would be that in so claiming you are being disingenuous. Otherwise, you are Christian, though perhaps not an exemplary one. (Of course, your lack of "achievement" could be proffered as *evidence of the charge of insincerity*, but if so insincerity, not lack of "achievement" would be the real objection.) However, as will appear below, I think the skeptic can show enough "achievement" in his progress to merit the appellation "skeptic." And, as will also appear below, if the success the "skeptic" has achieves its desired effect, then whether other people call him a "skeptic" will be of no concern to him at all.
- ¹⁶ On the translation of *phōnē*, see Mates, *The Skeptic Way*, 65, 255.
- ¹⁷ N.B.: This exhortation should be read as an elliptical version of (what Kant would call) a *hypothetical* imperative, *not* a categorical imperative. Its full expression would be something like, "Since we want *ataraxia* and it seems to us that *ataraxia* follows *epochē* like a shadow follows a body, let us have no beliefs!" The point isn't to dogmatize about the desirability of *ataraxia*; the point is to speak to those who are already seeking *ataraxia* (*PH* 1.12).
- ¹⁸ On the very important matter of the skeptical slogans, see *PH* 1.187–208, esp.:191, 204–205.
- ¹⁹ I owe this wonderfully precise mode of expression to Jeffrey Tlumak.
- ²⁰ Concerning the fact that the Problem of the External World was not formulated in antiquity and also the question whether Descartes created the modern skeptical problem, see Myles Burnyeat's splendid paper "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed" in *Idealism: Past and Present*, ed. Godfrey Vesey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), esp. 32–33, 41, and 43 ff. I would not claim (nor does Burnyeat) that Descartes created the Problem of the External World *ex nihilo*. We know he was familiar with

the then-available skeptical texts. But his transformation of these skeptical materials was far more innovative than even he himself believed. Consider, e.g., his reply to the third set of objections (from Thomas Hobbes) where he disowns any claim to originality concerning the skeptical doubts in his First Meditation (*The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), Vol. 2: 121). Descartes sold himself short on this point.

²¹ Although such cases are not helpful in trying to understand *Sextus*' claims about Pyrrhonism—since we will misunderstand him if we allow such anachronistic tinkering—such Cartesian cases are relevant to Pyrrhonism's *current* status, since *we* now have the Cartesian problem to consider. (See also note 31, below.)

²² See note 4, above.

²³ Sextus is not in principle opposed to using “foundational” attacks (e.g. *PH* 2.84), but he does so *very* infrequently and he is far more inclined to be *maximally* detailed and thorough (as any reader of *M* will attest!).

²⁴ For the Pyrrhonian, the past successes are the *cause* of his expectation of future successes, not a *justification* of this expectation. Remember our aim is to understand Sextus, and I think we can fairly credit him with this sort of expectation without being forced to also attribute to him the belief that his expectation is justified.

²⁵ Sextus rehearses Epicurus' famous argument that death is of no concern to us (*PH* 3.229), as well as other such arguments (*PH* 3.226 ff.).

²⁶ Sextus gives a clever, muscular version of the Problem of Evil (*PH* 3.9–12). He also presents other problems for religious beliefs (*PH* 3.2–8, *M* 9.29–48, 137–190), though he allows that the Pyrrhonian will avow some religious claims *without believing them* (*PH* 3.2, *M* 9.49). One might imagine this last point by considering what young children do when they first begin to imitate their parents during religious ceremonies; or one might think of what many adults do when they attend such services out of deference to a spouse or parent or to tradition, etc.

²⁷ The sections of *PH* dealing with ethics (3.168–279) have a very general flavor, covering things “good, bad, and indifferent” (3.168). I would be inclined to say the real target is value theory in general. (Sextus also treats ethical matters in *PH* 1.145–163 [The Tenth Mode] and in *M* 11 [“Against the Ethicists”].)

²⁸ This example can be found at *PH* 2.90 ff., as well as elsewhere in both *PH* and *M*, and Burnyeat has a nice discussion of it in “Can the Sceptic Live His Scepticism?” 40. It is the best heuristic I am aware of for letting yourself *feel* the real phenomenology of *epochē*.

²⁹ A more elaborate statement of the view expressed at *PH* 1.25–30, 3.235–237 can be found at *M* 11.110–140 and 141–167.

³⁰ Three notes: (1) The skeptic will not achieve perfect *ataraxia*, since some disturbance (e.g., hunger, thirst) is unavoidable. He will only achieve or only hopes to achieve complete *ataraxia* as regards *belief* (*PH* 1.25–26, 3.235, *M* 11.141–162). (2) Jonathan Barnes has argued that the issue of *epochē* beyond the degree of *epochē* required for the attainment of *ataraxia* is otiose and *should have been seen as otiose by Sextus* (“The Beliefs of a Pyrrhonist,” 18–19). My own suspicion is that Sextus believed that a full and complete state of *ataraxia* as regards belief required *total epochē*. Thus, in the language of my interpretative model, less-than-complete *epochē* is skepticism, and as such is less ideal than “Skepticism.” Nonetheless, Barnes’ emphasis on the importance of the *epochē* / *ataraxia* relation as a tool for interpreting Sextus is something I greatly admire in his paper. (3) Although I am not sure how much probative force we should judge Diogenes’ account of Pyrrho to have—some parts of it seem very dubious, see note 12 above—Pyrrho is reported as having been *very tranquil* and yet as having once been “enraged in his sister’s cause” and at another time “terrified” “when a cur rushed at him” (DL 9.66). Whether these would amount to non-skeptical slips or not is impossible to tell given the brevity of the reports, but Pyrrho is reported to have replied that it is “not easy entirely to strip oneself of human weakness; but one should strive with all one’s might against facts, by deeds if possible, and if not, in word” (ibid.). If these really were non-skeptical slips and if the report of Pyrrho’s reply can be accepted, this might offer some additional support for my aspirational account of Pyrrhonism: If Pyrrho himself, the eponymous forefather and patron saint of Pyrrhonism (of whom Sextus remarks that he appears to have “applied himself to Skepticism more vigorously and conspicuously than his predecessors” *PH* 1.7; see also DL 9.69–70), failed to achieve complete *epochē*, then perhaps the aspirational account can find further confirmation in the life of Pyrrho—“one should *strive with all one’s might . . .*” (DL 9.66, my emphasis) Again, though, I am not sure we can place much stock in Diogenes’ account, so I leave these remarks for the reader to judge.

³¹ In addition to the ethical theories embedded in Stoicism and Christianity, as already mentioned, one might plausibly add some of paradigmatically existentialist ethical positions, esp. those of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. For instance, if we went looking, how many Knights of Faith or Übermensch should we expect to find? (If we say “none, if we are speaking strictly” does that constitute some sort of decisive objection to these authors?)

³² Since my primary aim has been to develop an adequate understanding of *Sextus* by sketching an aspirational account of Pyrrhonism, I have concentrated mainly on the *ancient situation*, as it were. I think that my aspirational account of Pyrrhonism can be extended to cover the *modern situation* (one which includes Cartesian skepticism), though I cannot adequately defend such a claim here. (Every paper needs a promissory note.)

³³ I would like to thank Katheryn Doran, Jose Medina, Tim Roche, Jeffrey Tlumak, and Derek Turner for comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I also wish to express my indebtedness to

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