

Bett on the Modes of Suspension: Inconsistency?

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1 Introduction

Richard Bett's chapter on the modes is very rich and raises a number of complex issues. In fact, though treating only one subject, it delineates a complete view of Sextus' Pyrrhonism, for it deals with the skeptical ability, opposition, reasoning, and the historical development of skepticism, among other central topics. Unfortunately, I cannot address all of them, nor treat them in detail, but I would like to say a word on two or three of the main ones. But, before discussing them, I would like to acknowledge that I have learned a lot about Sextus from Bett's works and translations, and that I admire his works and, in particular, this book. His style is very light and fluent, so that it is very easy to follow his ideas, but also very subtle, so that you might think that it is easy to understand Sextus, when, in fact, his interpretation is rather complex. He is also an excellent person, very curious, helpful, friendly, and open to debate. As Sextus emphasizes, however, human beings disagree about everything. Accordingly, though some of the things I hold are compatible with many things he says, I will disagree with his interpretation. That is the best way to honor an original, instigating work and a serious philosopher.

One main point in Bett's interpretation is that Sextus does not know exactly what to do with any of the Modes. According to Bett, "the Modes are nowhere near as important as they sound when Sextus introduces them in the first book of *Outlines*" (p. 128). Not only are the Modes not very important to Sextus, but also they do not fit into Sextus' kind of skepticism. This raises the question: why, then, does Sextus present them? Bett has an answer: Sextus reported to us these Modes as a legacy of the skeptical tradition. In Bett's view, "he carries a lot of historical baggage to which he feels some loyalty. At the same time, much of this baggage he does not seem to find especially useful" (p. 128). After showing that, from a philosophical point of view, the Modes are not properly integrated into Sextan Pyrrhonism, Bett says that, from a historical point of view, Sextus felt constrained to report them to his readers.

This interpretation, for different reasons and with peculiarities for each case, applies to all the Modes. To begin with, Bett dismisses both the Eight Modes against causality and the Two Modes. Concerning the first, he says that "it looks as if Sextus is not particularly comfortable with the Eight Modes; he feels some obligation to mention them for the sake of completeness, but drops the subject as soon as possible" (p. 109). And, according to him, "the Two are not really distinct from the Five" (p. 109). But even if "this leaves the Ten Modes and the Five Modes, in Sextus' version of them, as the ones most likely to be of interest" (p. 109), Bett thinks that these Modes do not sit well with Sextan Pyrrhonism, for "the Ten Modes are just not particularly relevant to what he [Sextus] is trying to do" (p.

117) and, despite the fact that the Five Modes are more palatable for his tastes, “like the other sets of Modes, the Five are part of Pyrrhonism’s history” (p. 125). Thus, all the Modes presented by Sextus are to be seen as mere historical legacies, for they do not accord with Sextus’s specific form of skepticism.

This interpretation is surprising, for the Modes occupy half of the first book of the *Outlines* (PH 1.31–186). Why would Sextus devote so many pages of a book that is supposed to present to us *his* view of skepticism (PH 1.4) to a topic that does not fit his purpose? Moreover, the Modes are introduced as illustrating the basic notion of opposition (PH 1.35). Why would Sextus report these Modes if they do not properly illustrate what they are supposed to illustrate? After all, the Modes are presented as the way to reach suspension of judgment and thereby tranquility (PH 1.31), but if Bett is right, then these Modes do not illustrate the way in which Sextus wants to lead his readers to suspension. If this were the case, Sextus would be a bad philosopher.

However, we should adopt this interpretation only if there is no good philosophical explanation for the centrality of the Modes. Of course, historical legacy is part of the reason why Sextus presents them as the core of the first book of the *Outlines*. But, at first sight, it seems that their historical meaning alone does not explain the significance they appear to have. I think an interpreter should try to make *philosophical* sense of their centrality, instead of finding only an *historical* solution to the place they occupy. Sextus’ introduction in PH 1 is not a history of skepticism, but a systematic presentation of the basic characteristics of skepticism as a main kind of philosophy. It is how he sees the *skeptical philosophy*, how skeptical philosophy has come down to him (PH 1.4). What Bett says about Sextus including earlier phases of skepticism is certainly correct, but we still need a better solution to understand the philosophical role the Modes play in Sextus’ Pyrrhonism.

The second point I want to discuss in Bett’s interpretation is the following. The Modes of Suspension are introduced to show how the Pyrrhonist attains his goal, namely, *ataraxia*, through oppositions (PH 1.31–5). Now, there are two main interpretations. According to one, the Pyrrhonist offers arguments to the effect that one ought to suspend judgment, for the modes, considered as arguments, lead one to suspension as a conclusion, so that he is rationally compelled to suspend judgment. According to the other, the Pyrrhonist is psychologically carried by the opposition to suspension, for the Pyrrhonist cannot rely on dogmatic reason. In previous papers, Bett had argued that the good interpretation is the last one, but now he agrees that the first one at least looks plausible. Sextus, for instance, uses the verb *sunago*, which is ambiguous, meaning both “to conclude” or “to bring about” (114, note 17). Bett asks: “How do the Modes fit into this picture?” (p. 110). According to Bett, the Modes are reasonings leading to a conclusion, but Sextus’ skepticism allows only for a psychological transition. Bett argues for an interpretation according to which, in Sextus, there is just a psychological effect, divorcing the production of the state of mind from any rationality. Referring to the Five Modes, he affirms his general position on this issue: “And this, as we have seen, allows us to conceive of suspension of judgment not as a rational requirement, but as an outcome of the skeptic’s ability with no intellectual commitments attached” (p. 121). This is one reason why Sextus does not know what to do with the Modes. I will offer an interpretation according to which the Modes do fit Sextus’ purpose and includes both the psychological and the rational aspects of the inference. There is no need to choose between a psychological or a rational interpretation.

2 The Eight Modes and the Two Modes

Before getting into some details about the more important Ten Modes and Five Modes, I would like to make some remarks or suggestions concerning the Eight Modes and the Two Modes.

In PH 1.5, Sextus refers to some modes of suspension (*tines hoi tropoi tes epokhes*). Clearly, the Ten Modes, the Five Modes, and the Two Modes are to be classified as “modes of suspension,” as the end of PH 1.179 makes clear. But what about the Eight Modes? The first sentence of PH 1.180 suggests that the Eight Modes do not belong to the “modes of suspension.” They are meant to produce *aporia*, not *epokhe*. The change of word may indicate that Sextus is conscious that the Eight are not quite the same as the modes of suspension. Moreover, they seem to belong to physics, and so they should belong to the specific discourse of PH 3. Yet they are inserted (PH 1.180–186) before the next topic announced by PH 1.5, namely, the skeptical expressions (PH 1.187–209), so that they are included in the chapter on the modes of suspension, at least as an appendix. Sextus says that they are important enough to appear in the general discourse of PH 1, for they deal with a topic of which dogmatists are very proud. So it is not because they are modes of suspension that Sextus reports them in PH 1.

If these remarks concerning the placement of the Eight Modes are correct, then Bett’s suspicion that Sextus does not know exactly what to do with the Eight Modes is corroborated. What do they add to an introductory, general explanation of Pyrrhonism? What Sextus says about using the Five Modes to refute the causal explanations of the dogmatists is not very helpful. They show that dogmatists are rash (PH 1.186), but it seems that to display the rashness of dogmatists is not very important at this stage of book 1 of the *Outlines*. What I find particularly interesting is the interplay between the Modes of older skeptics and the Modes of the new skeptics. I will come back to this point later. Unfortunately, the five books corresponding to PH 1 that probably preceded M 7–11 are missing. Perhaps they could tell us more about the connection between these Eight Modes and the “modes of suspension.” So we are left in the dark until someone comes up with a good explanation. So far, I do not have any (interesting) philosophical explanation for the Eight Modes and their place in PH 1.

However, I do not share Bett’s opinion about the Two Modes. In my view, they are not merely a variation of the Five Modes. There is, it seems to me, a reason for this variation, which goes well beyond the mere wish to have as few modes as possible. They seem to play an important role in structuring the specific discourse against dogmatism found in PH 2–3. I want to suggest that the Two Modes are not merely dialectical (as Bett thinks the Five Modes are), but also have a positive function in the Pyrrhonist’s counter-argumentation (*antirresis*).

The skeptical investigation is divided into two books. PH 2 concerns logic, and logic deals with what is apprehended by itself and with what leads from what is apprehended by itself to what is not apprehended by itself. PH 3 concerns physics and ethics, and these two parts of philosophy deal with what is not apprehended by itself. Now, the Two Modes distinguish between what is apprehended by itself and what is apprehended through something else. Nothing is apprehended by itself because there is disagreement about the criterion; and nothing is apprehended through something else because of circular reasoning or regress, so that there is no sign (PH 1.178–9). Accordingly, what the Pyrrhonist establishes in relation to the logical part of philosophy is that nothing is apprehended by itself and, in relation to the physical and ethical parts, that nothing is apprehended through something

else. The fact that there is one book of PH dedicated to each Mode is accidental, but illustrative. In M 7–11, we find more books than Modes, but the structure is exactly the same. Sextus, then, consistently moves from what is apprehended by itself to what is not apprehended by itself, following the lead of the Two Modes.

One could raise the following objection. The Pyrrhonist finds in the Stoic conception of signs a similar scheme. If the philosopher wants to establish the truth concerning non-evident objects, she needs to start with something evident, infer through a sign, and arrive at a conclusion about the non-evident object. Sextus is merely following dialectically the Stoic scheme in order to structure the skeptical counterattack. And Sextus says explicitly that he is following the Stoics in their threefold division of philosophy and in the order he is going to investigate the three parts of philosophy (PH 2.13).

But this is what I find interesting about the Two Modes: there is no need to use the Stoic scheme, even if the Pyrrhonist can do that. It seems to me that the Pyrrhonist has his own way to organize his counterattack, not necessarily basing it only on what dogmatists say. Consider the disagreement about how many parts philosophy has and where should one start. Sextus prefers the opinion that philosophy has three parts, for it is “more complete” (M 7.16), and does not simply suspend his judgment concerning this issue; and he thinks that one should start with logic, not because, as the Stoics think, for pedagogical reasons (it makes the mind stronger) (M 7.23), but because it deals with the criterion of truth (M 7.24). This is the reason given also in PH 2.13, but this reason to begin with logic is not the Stoic reason we find in M 7.23. That Sextus is clearly not simply following the Stoics is highlighted by the fact that the Stoics investigate ethics after logic, whereas the Pyrrhonist investigates physics, leaving ethics as the last part to be investigated. Thus, one can safely say that the Pyrrhonist imposes an order to the philosophical investigation according to his own skeptical way of thinking.

What I am suggesting is that the Two Modes give the general rationale for structuring the three parts of philosophy, without any recourse to a dogmatic way of thinking. If so, I wouldn't say that Sextus does not know what to do with the Two Modes. It seems to me that Sextus ends the “modes of suspension” with the Two Modes, for they set the stage for the specific discourse and the methodical investigation of the three parts of philosophy. Of course, before investigating, first, what is apprehended by itself and, next, what is apprehended through something else, Sextus still has to explain the skeptical phrases and the difference between skepticism and other similar philosophies. But from an argumentative point of view, there is a direct link between the Two Modes and the specific discourse of PH 2–3.

3 The Ten Modes

Concerning the Ten Modes, Bett examines three interpretations. According to the orthodox reconstruction, there is an inference involved: faced with opposing appearances, the Pyrrhonist finds no way to settle the conflict and thereby suspends judgment. But Bett thinks this interpretation cannot be right, for “the problem with the orthodox reconstruction is that it does not seem to be consistent with Sextus' description of skepticism as an ‘ability’” (p. 111). It seems, then, that the ability to set up oppositions is a psychological device, not a matter of reasoning. Next, he presents Morison's reconstruction, which is meant to explain this skeptical ability. There is no inference in the Ten Modes, at least not a single one leading to suspension, but they are patterns or schemes to build oppositions such that, through their opposition, the Pyrrhonist is carried to suspension. There are only

dogmatic reasonings that conflict because their conclusions conflict. However, “contrary to Morison, the wording of many of these closing comments fits the orthodox reconstruction very nicely, but provides no hint of his own, more complicated reconstruction” (p. 112). Finally, he presents M. Williams’ reconstruction. Williams sees the Ten Modes as a negative epistemology meant to oppose the dogmatist epistemology, so that one destroys the other, bringing about suspension in the skeptic. But Bett does not accept this interpretation either. “Contrary to Williams, Sextus is very clear that suspension of judgment comes from rehearsal of the considerations within each Mode all by itself, not by juxtaposing these Modes with the positive epistemologies of dogmatic philosophers” (p. 112).

Where are we left? It seems that neither the orthodox interpretation, by attributing an inference to the Modes, nor the other two interpretations, by describing the ability to oppose appearances or epistemologies, are able to explain the Ten Modes. In other words, neither the interpretation that attributes a reasoning to the skeptical Modes, nor the psychological interpretation that sees them only as an ability to bring about suspension through a clash of dogmatic arguments, are satisfactory. It seems that we have reached a dead end. Each kind of interpretation faces insurmountable difficulties.

What is Bett’s solution to this impasse? Not surprisingly, he brings back his interpretation of incompatible phases in Sextus’ texts in order to solve the difficulty. He endorses the orthodox interpretation of the Ten Modes, for, after criticizing Morison’s interpretation, he says that “the orthodox reconstruction seems to have quite a lot in its favor; it may not be compulsory (if I may borrow Sextus’ language for my own purpose), but it certainly seems the easiest reading of the text” (p. 113). According to Bett, Sextus “repeatedly seems to signal that the *way* in which they are supposed to do this is by forcing suspension of judgment as a rational necessity” (p. 114). However, following the psychological interpretation, he does not think that this rational necessity suits Sextus’ kind of skepticism, for it “is incompatible with his account of skepticism as an ability applied to all subjects” (p. 114). The orthodox interpretation, therefore, is closer to the texts.

But this seems to highlight an inconsistency on Sextus’ part, for “Sextus points to an understanding of the Ten Modes that saddles them with intellectual commitments one would expect him not to want” (p. 115). The price to pay, if one accepts the orthodox reconstruction as the one intended by Sextus, is to find an inconsistency in Sextan Pyrrhonism. “It looks, then, as if the Ten Modes are indeed inconsistent with Sextus’ approach elsewhere: they are arguments for conclusions (“we must suspend judgment about X”) of a sort that Sextus would not generally want to endorse” (p. 114). There seems to be an incompatibility between the Ten Modes as involving theoretical commitments and Sextus’ avoidance of any theoretical commitment. The price to pay, if one accepts this incompatibility, is to say that the Ten Modes cannot be part of Sextus’ kind of skepticism.

Bett is willing to pay this price. His explanation, as expected, is that “the Ten Modes, as we have said, derive from Aenesidemus, who belonged to a quite different phase in the history of Pyrrhonism, and it is quite possible that they were devised to address concerns rather different from those animating Sextus himself” (p. 115). So, at the end of the day, Bett’s solution to the “inconsistency” he finds in Sextus is to split Sextus’ text into two layers: some parts belong to one phase in the history of ancient skepticism, other parts belong to another phase in this history; they may conflict if one puts them together, but, once one realizes that they belong to different phases, they no longer contradict each other and each one is fine in its historical phase. “For this reason, I suspect that his attitude to the Ten may in the

end have been not so different from his attitude to the Eight Modes on causal explanation: they are a relic of an earlier period with which he is not really comfortable” (p. 116). By Sextus’ time, Pyrrhonism was an ability. It was not like that when Aenesidemus founded Pyrrhonism; at that time, a skeptic could argue for a skeptical conclusion.

Bett concurs with Williams (1988, p. 554) and Morison (2011) that the notion of an ability is crucial to understanding Sextus’ Pyrrhonism; so do I. After all, this is how Sextus explains the concept (*ennoia*) (PH 1.5) of skepticism, as an ability to set up balanced oppositions (PH 1.8). But I think that Bett goes wrong when he thinks that, by being an ability, skepticism excludes any rational commitment. Why is the ability to solve mathematical puzzles not rational, for instance? Why does the ability to compose a symphony not involve reasoning? What seems wrong to me is the dichotomy: either a reasoning or an ability. Reasoning is or involves, it seems to me, an ability; and an ability can be an ability to reason “correctly,” leading to suspension of judgment (PH 1.17). But before exploring this line of interpretation further, I would like to make some methodological remarks.

Bett is not at all worried about attributing to Sextus an inconsistency, since he understands Sextus as having put together conflicting texts from different phases of skepticism. Comparing his own position to Morison’s, Bett says:

I think our disagreement may come down to one of methodology: how far should one go to rescue an author’s consistency? At least in the case of Sextus, I find positing inconsistency is often a small price to pay for textual fidelity. (But Morison would no doubt question that way of putting it.) (p. 114, note 16)

Now, I disagree with Bett’s methodology. I do not think that attributing to a philosopher an inconsistency is a small price to pay. We should apply first the Principle of Charity and try to make an author as consistent as possible. This is to Morison’s credit, though I do not think that his solution is the correct one, for the reasons pointed out by Bett. The best interpretation is the one who sees more consistency in all texts, the one who attributes a more coherent thought to the philosopher. But I do not want to base my argument on personal preferences. I think that Bett himself, in another chapter of the book, espouses this more sympathetic approach to an author.

In his first chapter, “The Pyrrhonist’s Dilemma,” Bett shows that there are a number of inconsistent statements in Sextus. For instance, in some passages, he says that the Pyrrhonist is on the side of ordinary people, but in some others he criticizes them as if they were as dogmatic as many philosophers. Or he may describe the skeptics as philosophers, though sometimes only dogmatists are considered philosophers. Bett does not simply say that these conflicting passages belong to different phases of skepticism, nor does he simply criticize Sextus for being inconsistent. He tries to find an interpretation to accommodate this apparent inconsistency. And he makes a nice suggestion: Sextus wants his readers to suspend judgment about these issues. He is not inconsistent, for there is a single philosophical position common to these conflicting passages that explains them. I do not endorse this particular interpretation, but I do endorse this methodology.

This more sympathetic approach surfaces again in his “Introduction” to his translation of *Against Those in the Disciplines*. Bett finds a similar problem in this work, for Sextus describes the skeptic suspending judgment, not arguing for definite conclusions, while at the same time he seems to engage in negative

dogmatism (2018, p. 11). Then, he asks: “how are we to account for this discrepancy?” (2018, p. 12). Now, there is a solution (“an easy answer”), in which suspension of judgement can accommodate the supposed negative dogmatism, for this is just one side of the opposition. Bett thinks “this answer is ultimately the correct answer” (2018, p. 12). There is no contradiction or tension between the old phase with its negative dogmatism and the new one with its ability to balance both sides of an opposition.

Bett, however, is reluctant to accept the solution, for “this is not quite enough by itself” (2018, p. 12). He gives two reasons for his reluctance; the second is his historical hypothesis of the phases of skepticism (2018, p. 13–14). But even granting that Sextus drew on different sources and that the Pyrrhonism of older skeptics such as Aenesidemus is different from the Pyrrhonism of new skeptics such as Agrippa and Sextus, Bett still insists that “as the earlier ‘easy answer’ suggested, we can understand the strongly negative thrust of Sextus’ argumentation as designed to cancel out the positive cases” (2018, p. 14). In a footnote, he is very clear on the point:

In Bett 2006 I concluded that the negative argumentation could not be reconciled with Sextus’ official purpose in M 1–6. I now think that this went too far, and that, without giving up the idea of an earlier phase of Pyrrhonism where negative argumentation was accepted, or the idea that M 1–6 shows traces of that earlier phase, we can give a consistent account of the work on its own terms. (2018, p. 14, n. 27)

In the chapter on the Modes we are examining, however, Bett goes back to his old, critical attitude of looking for inconsistencies. Concerning methodology, I would ask Bett to be more consistent. My suggestion is that he stick to the more sympathetic methodology employed in chapter 1 and in this “Introduction.”

The task that faces the interpreter is that of finding an interpretation that makes Sextus consistent. Bett’s final solution in his “Introduction” to *Against Those in the Disciplines* is that suspension of judgment gives unity to Sextus’ skepticism: “Nonetheless, we are at liberty to understand suspension of judgment as the consistent purpose of the work” (2018, p. 15). I agree. My solution will insist on the idea of an ability, but in a way that differs from Bett’s conception of what an ability is. And it will construe the relationship between the different phases in a more cooperative way.

As Bett says, there is no need to give up his historical hypothesis about the phases of skepticism, and Sextus himself distinguishes among old and new skeptics. In fact, I think Bett has made a number of interesting and important analyses in this direction (see Bett 1997, 2000). His distinguishing of phases in the history of ancient skepticism has opened our eyes to many subtle differences and raised our understanding to a higher level. But what seems questionable to me is employing the idea of phases in order to (dis)solve an alleged inconsistency within Sextus’ Pyrrhonism—and not only for methodological reasons, but also because Sextus didn’t see skepticism in quite the same way as a historian of philosophy sees it, as consisting of different, incompatible phases. It is time to resume our discussion of the Ten Modes and find an interpretation that avoids inconsistencies.

Sextus appears to hold that these different phases are not only compatible, but complementary. This is especially true concerning the modes of suspension, regarding which Sextus’ concluding remark is:

They [the new skeptics] put them [the Five Modes] forward not as rejecting the Ten Modes but in order to refute the rashness of the dogmatists in a more varied way by using both sets together. (PH 1.177)

It seems to me that Sextus thinks that skepticism is a kind of philosophy that keeps growing and improving with time. New skeptics can add new arguments to old arguments, thereby widening the skeptical ability.

This is, I think, what lies behind Sextus' remark about the number of the Ten Modes: he cannot make any firm assertion about their number, for there may be more (PH 1.35)—more, but not less, for new modes may be invented. For Sextus, he is simply recording skepticism as a kind of philosophy as it appears to him in the moment (PH 1.4). Perhaps in the future the Ten Modes will become the Eleven Modes or even the Twelve Modes. Moreover, skepticism has different groups of Modes such as the Ten Modes, plus the Five Modes and the Two Modes. Had Sextus written an *Outline* before the time of the new skeptics, he would have reported only the Ten Modes, but not, of course, the Five or the Two. Finally, the way in which these Ten Modes are reported may vary. In Sextus' case, he incorporates material coming down from the new skeptics in the Ten Modes (e.g., PH 1.59–61, 1.114–7). The result is an original, more complex presentation of the Ten Modes than one presumably would have found in Aenesidemus (and does find in Diogenes Laertius).

From Sextus' point of view, what appears to him as one of the three main kinds of philosophy, namely, skepticism, is a coherent tradition. I think that the notion of “a more varied way” allows for the integration of different phases of skepticism and is clearly connected to the idea of an ability that involves opposition in any way whatsoever (PH 1.9). Applied to the Ten Modes, this means that the more Modes a skeptic has, the more ability he has to refute dogmatism. But here is not the place to describe the plasticity of the skeptic's ability. Instead, let me focus on the rational and the psychological readings of the Ten Modes in order to develop an interpretation according to which Sextus is a consistent philosopher.

Like Bett, I also think that Sextus intends the Ten Modes to be read as arguments whose conclusion is suspension of judgment. Is this reading inconsistent with what Sextus says in other places? If so, which ones, exactly? One might answer: in his criticism of dogmatic demonstration (PH 2.134–92; M 8.300–481). Given this criticism, Sextus cannot have any commitment to “norms of rationality” and so cannot argue as he does in the Ten Modes. Why not? Does Sextus say that the *only* way to reason and infer is through dogmatic proof (say, Stoic demonstration or Aristotelian syllogism)? It seems that many scholars simply assume that either there is dogmatic reason or there is no reason at all; suspension is either a rational conclusion or a psychological effect (p. 110). The question would then be “whether Sextus intends to make suspension of judgment a rational requirement, with the problem of consistency that brings with it, or whether he means them simply to generate suspension of judgment as an outcome” (p. 120–1).

It seems that there are only two alternatives for the Pyrrhonist: either he has a strong (dogmatic) commitment to rationality or he is simply led by a causal psychological chain of events. I think these two alternatives presuppose a dogmatic commitment on the part of the interpreter. They seem to present a dilemma for the skeptic: if he is rational, he must be dogmatic; if not, his remarks are merely psychological, and nobody is compelled to suspend judgment.

The usual (“orthodox”) solution is to say that the Pyrrhonist is using reason only dialectically. He accepts what the dogmatist accepts in order to overthrow dogmatism. He himself would not be committed to these reasonings. I want to challenge this orthodox interpretation. The idea is not new.

Alan Bailey (2002, p. 126–42, p. 256–66) has noted that the Ten Modes are meant for the skeptics. He remarks that the skeptic himself arrives at suspension because he employs these Modes in the proper circumstances. The orthodox, dialectical interpretation makes it seem that everything the skeptic says is valid only for dogmatists and that the skeptic would have nothing to do with what follows on dogmatic assumptions. But this orthodox interpretation is not quite right. For, as Bailey points out, the skeptic himself has to get there too; he has to become a skeptic himself.

Accordingly, Bailey distinguishes between arguments used by the skeptic in order to arrive at suspension (such as the Ten Modes) and arguments used to induce suspension of judgement in other people (such as the arguments in the specific discourse in each part of philosophy). But in my view, all sorts of arguments (the modes of suspension as well as the arguments in the specific discourse) are meant for skeptics and dogmatists alike. If they are convincing arguments, then they should induce suspension of judgment in everybody. Bailey, however, makes the important suggestion that the Ten Modes are not merely dialectical, but proposed in *voce propria*. There is a line of reasoning in the Ten Modes that compels the skeptic to suspend judgment. But how can the skeptic do that? Doesn't this commit him to dogmatic presuppositions?

Much earlier than Bailey, in 1993, Porchat interpreted the Ten Modes along the same lines, but with the advantages of avoiding the unsatisfactory distinction between arguments for skeptics and arguments for dogmatists and of explaining how the Pyrrhonist could argue skeptically in favor of suspension of judgment as a conclusion in the Ten Modes. I will now outline his solution as I see it (Porchat 2007, p. 166–171).

The Pyrrhonist has no reason to accept the above dilemma, for the idea that “all reasoning is dogmatic or there is no reason at all” is not a skeptical idea, but a dogmatic one. We have passages in which Sextus clearly endorses some kinds of reasoning, while rejecting others. The most important ones, for our purposes, are those regarding signs: indicative and commemorative. Sextus, of course, rejects indicative signs, but he says that skeptics accept commemorative signs (PH 2.100–2; M 8.156–8). In other passages, he emphasizes that experience allows us to solve puzzles that dogmatism cannot solve (PH 2.229–59).

These passages are well-known. What matters is whether, and how, they can illuminate our topic. Can the commemorative sign shed some light on the Ten Modes? Can we understand the inferences drawn in the Ten Modes in the light of the commemorative sign? If one can do this, then one can see that there is no inconsistency in Sextus: one can see how the ability to suspend judgment using the Ten Modes involves reasoning. Moreover, as Bett has shown in chapter 5 (on signs), the distinction between commemorative and indicative signs is not present in Aenesidemus, but it is present in the more recent skeptics. So if this explanation succeeds, then we can see one more case in which skepticism, for Sextus, integrates in a unified, growing whole all Pyrrhonists, both old and new.

Now, a commemorative sign is not such as to lead us by its nature, if it has one, to what it signifies. Both things (what signifies and what is signified) must have been observed together in order for us to establish a connection, like a wound and a scar. Thus, we have three things: what signifies, a transition based on

experience, and what is signified. So, for instance, once we see a scar, we remember that we observed many times that a wound brought about a scar, and so we infer that the person was previously wounded. The link between what signifies and what is signified is not formal or a “deduction” (whether a Stoic demonstration or an Aristotelian syllogism), nor a certain “induction” (PH 2.104). But this does not imply that there is no rational connection. One might argue that this is not, properly speaking, a matter of reasoning, but only of memory. Indeed, Sextus insists on the role of memory (M 8.288; M 1.52). But it seems to me that this is a kind of reasoning, for it allows us, for example, to make forecasts in many *tékhnai* (M 5.2). And Sextus goes as far as to say that this link is “causal” (M 5.104), so that commemorative signs can even be causal inferences. That’s all very Humean: causal inferences based on repeated past experience.

In sum for an inference to be acceptable to a skeptic, it must unfold entirely within the phenomenal realm, so to speak. (a) Its starting point must be something observable (and observed); (b) what is to be inferred must also be something that appears; and (c) the link between them must be established by experience. Thus, a skeptic may infer, say, fire from smoke. (In some cases, the link may be conventional: a white flag means a temporary truce, for example.)

What matters here is whether this scheme suits what goes on in Sextus’ presentation of the Ten Modes. I suggest that the scheme in the Ten Modes can be read as follows. (a) The starting point is something that we have observed in our experience of things. (In the first Mode, the skeptic can even infer from what we observe what probably appears to animals.) There is no need to claim, as many scholars do, that these starting points are taken from the writings of dogmatists. In fact, Sextus takes some care to say that the irregularities (*anomalía*) that led the talented person to philosophical investigation (PH 1.12) are not peculiar to skeptics, nor even to philosophers; rather, but they appear to us all in our experience of the world (PH 1.210–211; cf. 1.213). (b) The conclusion is suspension of judgment. As Sextus explains, suspension of judgment is a state of the mind (*stásis diánoías*) (PH 1.8); what is withheld is the mind’s assent (PH 1.196). So the Ten Modes lead us to something we experience: a *páthos* in us; and when the Pyrrhonist says he suspends judgment, he is expressing this *páthos*. (c) What about the connection? It must also be empirical, i.e., the skeptic experiences that, given the oppositions mentioned in the Ten Modes, he is unable to decide which appearance is true and which false, and this indecision or hesitation is suspension of judgment. So there is a link in his experience.

Now, if this is plausible, then one can say that the commemorative sign explains not only causal reasoning, such as “there is smoke, therefore there is fire,” but also the reasoning of the Ten Modes: “I suspend judgement, for there is an undecidable opposition in appearances.” Given the oppositions and given that one cannot settle the conflicts, one infers that the rational attitude is that of suspension. In this sense, it is rational to suspend judgment, or one ought to suspend judgment. Besides dialectical arguments, the Pyrrhonist can use empirical arguments, and the Ten Modes seem to be of this latter kind. It is not, as Bailey suggested, that there are two kinds of arguments, some for private use (for skeptics), others for public use (for dogmatists). What distinguishes these two kinds of arguments is their argumentative structure. If the argument used by the Pyrrhonist is based, say, on what is evident and, through an indicative sign or a demonstration, concludes something about a non-evident object, then it is a dialectical argument; if an argument is based on a dogmatic definition, then it is dialectical; if the skeptic opposes two dogmatic arguments, then these two arguments are dogmatic. But a Pyrrhonist may use non-dialectical arguments as well, such as these empirical arguments based on experience. There are many sorts of arguments.

If the above interpretation of the Ten Modes is correct, then they fit nicely with Sextan Pyrrhonism and there is no inconsistency at all. There is no need to suppose that Sextus is combining sources from different phases into an inconsistent whole. On the contrary, he is integrating distinct phases of skepticism into a unified whole. As he sees it, skepticism grows into an increasingly complex philosophy, just as a seed grows into a tree. That is why, perhaps, Aenesidemus is not so important for Sextus: he was just the first Pyrrhonist; many came after him. What matters is the tradition, not any individual skeptic.

Moreover, there is no need to side with one alternative (suspension is a rational conclusion) or the other (it is a psychological effect). In a sense, it is both: it is rational to infer suspension of judgment, given the oppositions and our incapacity to decide between them; and we are led to such a (psychological) state of the mind. But we are led to this psychological state because there is a reason for this conclusion; this reason, however, is not one to which Sextus is unwilling to commit. On the contrary, he willingly embraces commemorative signs and empirical inferences. The skeptical ability is an ability to develop forms of reasoning leading to suspension of judgment. Most of the time, he uses what dogmatists themselves say, but sometimes he elaborates empirical arguments that are at the disposal of the skeptic. My interpretation has the advantage of bringing together what is rational (in a skeptical sense, without any dogmatic commitment) and what is psychological, avoiding the problems facing each alternative taken in isolation.

A last point on Bett's historical hypothesis. I do not want to dispute his interpretation of Aenesidemus as a kind of negative dogmatist. Instead, I want to focus on a more particular point. According to Bett, "we have no indication that Aenesidemus spoke of skepticism as an ability. But by Sextus' time, Pyrrhonism may have moved on – become more sophisticated, if you like" (p. 116). He may be right that there is no explicit evidence that Aenesidemus defined the concept of skepticism as a specific sort of ability. But we also don't have any explicit claim to the contrary. At best, we have to find clues. I think there are at least two important ones. First, the very passage in which Sextus describes this ability uses Aenesideman language, for he restricts *phainomenon* to sensible things (PH 1.8), and we know that this is how Aenesidemus used the word, whereas Sextus generally uses it more broadly. Sextus calls our attention to the fact that this particular use of the word is limited to this moment ("now"; *nun*) (PH 1.9), and a bit later, when he explains how this ability applies in all sorts of ways, he uses *phainomenon* in this restricted sense again (PH 1.31–33). In another place he points out that Aenesidemus used the word so (M 8.215–216). As is well-known by now, Sextus himself uses *phainomenon* to refer to both sensible and intellectual objects. Thus, it seems probable that the passage in which Sextus defines skepticism as an ability comes from Aenesidemus.

The second hint comes from PH 1.12, where Sextus presents the two skeptical principles. Once again, the language seems Aenesideman, for Sextus uses the word *anomalía* to describe the causal origin of skepticism. There are reasons to believe that this word comes from Aenesidemus, as it is used in Sextus' exposition of the Ten Modes four times (PH 1.112, 1.114, 1.132, and 1.163). Most other occurrences of *anomalía* seem to match its use in the Tenth Mode, concerning moral and religious practices in common life (PH 3.233–235), but also the perceptual cases of the Fourth and Seventh Modes (M 9.191). In fact, a few years ago Bett himself suggested to me, when I was looking into the peculiar role played by *anomalía*, contrasting it to *diaphonia*, that *anomalía* seems to be an Aenesideman word. Moreover, what Bett says in his "Introduction" to *Against Those in the Disciplines* should perhaps incline him to accept this hypothesis. As we saw above, for him M 1–6 has a negative-dogmatic flavor (2018, p. 11), and he identifies this negative

dogmatism with Aenesidemus or an even earlier phase of skepticism (2018, p. 13). But Sextus tells us that the skeptic begins his counterattack against the Disciplines when he is perturbed by *anomalía* (M 1.6). If so, then *anomalía* is connected to the supposed negative dogmatism typical of this earlier phase. These two pieces of evidence not only reinforce each other, but may also be present in the same passage, for in PH 1.29, where *anomalía* appears again, we also find the Aenesidemanian contrast between *phainomena* and *noumena*.

This is evidence, though not decisive, that already Aenesidemus thought of skepticism as an ability. This historical hypothesis is not crucial to my argument in this paper, since the main focus is Sextus, but it fits my interpretation nicely. If the Ten Modes are forms of reasoning (as Bett agrees) and if Aenesidemus conceived of skepticism as an ability (as I am suggesting), then the combination of rationality and ability extends back to Aenesidemus, i.e., the idea of a rational ability is present in the earlier phase of skepticism. Anyway, if this is a good hypothesis, then Bett's interpretation also faces an historical difficulty. But, of course, Bett may simply reject this hypothesis based on other evidence, or say that it is not well founded or faces its own difficulties.

4 The Five Modes

Bett thinks that Sextus feels more at home with the Five Modes. As he says, “the Five Modes are much more general, and this already makes them much more suited to Sextus’ purpose” (p. 118). And if, concerning the Ten Modes, Bett sided with the orthodox interpretation, concerning the Five Modes he now prefers Williams’ reconstruction. “Hence Michael Williams’ contention that the Modes apply the method of opposition in epistemology seems much more plausible in the case of the Five Modes than the Ten” (p. 120, note 31). This means that

the Five Modes are explicitly set up as a response to some piece of dogmatic theorizing; the dogmatist puts forward certain contentions, and the Five Modes then throw these into question. There is, then, an inherently oppositional character to the Five Modes; they are designed as a counterweight to argumentative activity that is already under way. (p. 118)

I think he is right that the Five Modes are more dialectical in character than the Ten Modes are. It seems to me that the explanation I have given of the reasoning of the Ten Modes does not apply to the Five Modes. They do not employ empirical reasoning, for some of them point out formal defects in justification (circularity, regress, arbitrary hypothesis). But this dialectical character does not depend on their working together in opposition to dogmatic arguments for a positive epistemology.

Bett's approach is to focus on the Five Modes as an integrated set, apparently following Williams' lead (p. 120, note 31). It is true that Sextus makes some interesting remarks about how they might be combined (PH 1.169–177). *We* may see them as a general, systematic challenge to dogmatism. But when Sextus does that, he does not intend them as a negative set against another positive set. When he mentions their work, his purpose is only to show that they apply to all objects (sensible and intelligible) (PH 1.169). Sextus does not even imply that all of them taken together are to be opposed together to what dogmatists say. In fact, each one

of the Five Modes is said to lead to suspension by itself (PH 1.164–169). Of course, they can be used collectively, in pairs, in trios, or even all of them. And Sextus uses them together in many cases. But they are not meant to be used only in a systematic way in order to counter positive dogmatic epistemologies. At least, nothing in the texts points in this direction.

There is something ironic here. For Williams has argued that some of the Five Modes are not oppositional, such as the regress mode and the circularity mode. According to him, “only the first, Discrepancy, is reminiscent of the method of opposition” (1988, p. 568). In fact, Striker (1996, p. 116–117) had already suggested this idea, when she identified two different structures in the Ten Modes. For her, the mode of relativity does not use an opposition structure to lead us to suspension (1996, p. 126–131). Now we are seeing that her idea applies to the Five Modes as well. It is true that Bett affirms that they are oppositional taken as a whole, not by themselves. However, we’ve seen that they are not oppositional even taken as a whole. What I find interesting, just like Williams, is that four of the Five Modes simply do not fit the description of the skeptical ability (PH 1.8), nor its main principle (PH 1.12). It is enough to point out that a dogmatic argument for *p* involves circularity or infinite regress (or arbitrary assumption or, if Striker is right, relativity) in order to enable one to suspend judgment. The Pyrrhonist can reach suspension of judgment without setting up an opposition. My suggestion, in the case of these modes, is the same as before: the Pyrrhonist’s ability is to be interpreted as a matter of a varied way of bringing about suspension of judgment through arguments.

If this is on the right track, then the Pyrrhonist may even use some non-oppositional arguments despite Sextus’ description of the skeptic’s ability. This ability is exercised in the light, or under the guidance, of the main principle. My suggestion is to broaden the resources available to the skeptic in exercising his ability. We found examining the Ten Modes that they are empirical arguments. What Williams and Striker suggested is that some arguments may not involve any opposition at all; they may have a different structure. Must the Pyrrhonist use uniquely oppositional arguments? Why should he unduly restrict his critical activity in that way? If my suggestion is plausible, then perhaps the *málista arkhé* could be translated by the “most frequent principle” (PH 1.12), but by no means the only one; *málista*, after all, has this sense of being more frequent. The main principle may be just that: the main one, but not the only one. As Striker has noted (1996, p. 119), the oppositional type of argument belonged, “according to Sextus Empiricus (PH 1.5–6), to the special (*eidikos*) part of the Pyrrhonist exposition.” Accordingly, the ability to reach suspension is mainly the ability to set up oppositions, especially in the three parts of philosophy, but it is not necessarily restricted to that ability.

In sum, the Five Modes fit the basic idea of an ability to reach suspension of judgment through reasoning. Someone is more skillful the more capacities and resources she has. A good tennis player is someone who can serve well, can hit the ball with topspin, underspin or flat, has a good volley at the net, has a strong smash, moves his legs quickly, has good reflexes, etc. The ability to play tennis (well) involves all these abilities. I suggest it is the same with the skeptical ability: the skeptic must do many different things well. These different things are not inconsistent, but complementary. Their relation is not, so to speak, logical, like the coherence between the *dogmata* of a dogmatic doctrine (PH 1.16); rather, they involve doing different things to the same purpose. Even if Sextus’ sources come from different phases of skepticism, they may combine to form a richer whole; even if they belong to the history of skepticism, they may be used to Sextus’ purpose. Sextus is not an inconsistent, careless philosopher who merely compiles what has

been passed down to him without knowing what to do with that material. Rather, he presents a subtle, complex, powerful conception of skepticism.

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