

**SKEPTICAL ARGUMENTS AND PYRRHONIAN PRACTICE:
A RESPONSE TO RICHARD BETT**

Michael Williams

Johns Hopkins University
Email: mwilliams@jhu.edu

1. Richard Bett's *How to Be a Pyrrhonist* is a splendid book. Bett covers a lot of ground in an attractively brief compass, combining meticulous scholarship with a sharp eye for difficulties that face attempts to make philosophical sense of skepticism, as Sextus presents it. I have learned much from Bett's work, so I shall focus on an issue where we have a significant disagreement: the problem of the Modes. This issue is centrally important and especially puzzling.

Sextus introduces the Modes as further explaining how the skeptic sustains suspension of judgment (*epoche*). But on a quite natural reading, they are inconsistent with Sextus's preferred account of skepticism as an *ability*. According to Sextus,

Scepticism is an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability which, because of the equipollence (*isostheneia*) in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment and afterwards to tranquillity (PH1, 8).

For Sextus, the vital feature of this 'method of opposition' is that it proceeds *case-by-case*, dogmatic claims to have discovered the truth being dealt with as the skeptic encounters them. Sextus gives no indication that the Pyrrhonian intends to—or even could—undermine the beliefs he targets in one fell swoop: say, by arguing that no beliefs of some broad kind will ever amount to knowledge. Accordingly, in Books 2 and 3 of *Outlines*, and at greater length in other works, he presents detailed criticisms of pretty much the entire range of philosophical views currently on offer. Why would he go to this trouble if he had a few brief arguments to show that, since no question can be definitively settled, no one knows the truth about anything? Yet this is just what the Modes seem to be. Indeed, they exploit considerations—conflicting appearances, the threat of a regress of justification—that are still staples of skeptical argumentation. What is going on?

To his credit Bett, recognizes the problem, which readers of Sextus have not always appreciated. Bett's view is that Sextus doesn't appreciate it either: the Modes just don't fit with his ability-based account of the skeptic's method. However, this may not matter too much, since Sextus makes less use of them than we might expect. Bett reaches the original, if "rather disappointing", conclusion that "the Modes are nowhere near as important as they sound when Sextus introduces them in the first book of *Outlines*" (128).

In building his case, Bett discusses two attempts to reconcile the Modes with the method. One is due to Benjamin Morison.¹ As Bett explains,

Morison sees the Ten Modes as just giving us starting points for constructing opposing arguments. They present us with opposing appearances, and these give us pointers to how one might generate opposing arguments concerning how things actually are. For example, if someone says that honey is sweet because that is how it tastes, one can argue with equal persuasiveness that it is not sweet, and the Ten Modes give us suggestions for how that argument and many others like it can be deployed in a manner quite consistent with the picture of skepticism as an ability (111-2).

The other reading is due to me.² My thought is that

... the Ten Modes do argue for conclusions closing off our grasp of the truth on all sorts of topics, but these must be understood as one side of a pair of opposing arguments, the other side being the positive arguments of the non-skeptical philosophers for a reliable criterion of truth (112).

For Bett, though both suggestions are “philosophically ingenious ways of rescuing Sextus from inconsistency”, neither works as a reading of the *Outlines* since “they do not appear to fit the text” (112). The Modes, especially the Ten, may be residues from an earlier, less sophisticated phase in Pyrrhonism’s development. If Sextus had seen more clearly, he would have left them out, though in practice he has the good sense not to make them carry too much weight.

The choice between approaching the problem ‘historically’ or ‘philosophically’ is not strictly either/or. Often, we find ourselves trying to explain what a philosopher is driving at, while admitting that he doesn’t explain himself clearly as we would like. (If philosophers were always perfectly clear, there would be nothing to explain.) Granted, there are limits to charity: if Sextus just missed the problem, philosophical resolutions are exercises in rational reconstruction. But the inconsistency, if that’s what it is, between the Modes and the account of skepticism as resting on an ability is so glaring that it is hard to believe that Sextus simply failed to see it. Bett makes an impressive textual case for his view; and one way or another, the evidence he marshals has to be accounted for. However, there is textual evidence that points the other way. As I shall argue, the structure and content of *Outlines* 1 make it clear that Sextus is acutely aware of the charge of inconsistency and repeatedly rebuts it. I shall then turn to the Modes themselves. Bett is surely right that the Ten are relics of an earlier phase of Pyrrhonism, but Sextus does not present them *in their original form*, suggesting that he is less concerned with giving an accurate account of the earlier material than with showing what later skeptics can do with it. This thought is further supported by Sextus’s modifications, which involve incorporating material from the Five Modes. This is significant: because, as Bett concedes, my contention that the Modes apply the method of opposition in

¹ Morison (2011).

² Williams (1988).

epistemology is more plausible in the case of the Five Modes than the Ten (120, n. 31). In the end, it may be that Bett and I are not as far apart as we seem.

2. To get the problem into sharper focus, let me introduce some non-Sextan terminology. *Theoretical skepticism* is one or another negative epistemological thesis: for example, the thesis that nothing we believe amounts to knowledge. An argument for such a thesis is a *skeptical argument*, and one who endorses it is a *theoretical skeptic*. By contrast, *practical skepticism* consists in adopting a distinctive epistemic stance: ceasing to claim or attribute knowledge, where non-skeptics think they possess it, or suspending judgment where non-skeptics retain firm beliefs. Contemporary discussions of skepticism are concerned almost exclusively with theoretical skepticism, which is seen as a kind of paradox: impossible to accept, though hard to refute. By contrast, Pyrrhonian skepticism is evidently practical: not an epistemological conundrum but a way of life.

Sextus is well aware that critics see the idea of such a life “without belief” as self-defeating. The objection takes two forms. One, —let’s call it the logical objection—is that, whether they admit it or not, the skeptics’ practice of suspending judgment shows that they believe at least one thing, namely, that the truth cannot be known. The other, the so-called *apraxia* objection, is that a total lack of beliefs would render us incapable of acting, thus of living. As Diogenes Laertius puts the objection, the skeptics “reject life, since they reject everything of which life consists.”³ In *Outlines* 1, Sextus deflects these objections by showing that they rest on failures to understand what skepticism is about.

Let’s start with the logical objection, which gets the lion’s share of attention. The charge is that, contrary to their pretension to suspend judgment about everything, or at least everything philosophical, the skeptics assent to theoretical skepticism. This thought is natural enough. Why *else* would one be a skeptic? How else *could* a rational person be one?

A reader sympathetic to this thought will not be surprised by the skeptical arguments promulgated in the Modes. I think that this is why the problem has not always been clearly seen. If we ask, in a general way, how practical skepticism relates to the theoretical skepticism, it is fatally easy—especially if we are under the spell of modern, post-Cartesian skepticism—to assume that there is ultimately only one answer to this question. The conception of skepticism implied by this answer has been well stated by Gisela Striker:

[skepticism] may be characterized by two features: a thesis, viz. that nothing can be known, and a recommendation, viz., that one should suspend judgment on all matters.⁴

Of course, Striker does not mean merely that these two features are co-present. Rather, the thesis serves to rationalize the recommendation, making it seem reasonable or even compelling. How does it do that? There must be a third element. Whether or not he avows it explicitly, the skeptic must be committed to some epistemic norm or prescription: for example, that (rationally) one should suspend judgment in cases where one fails to know the truth. In short, *practical is*

³ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, translated by Pamela Mensch and edited by James Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018), Bk. 9,104 (p. 484).

⁴ Striker (1996), p. 92.

skepticism is based on theoretical skepticism, the two being linked by commitment to an epistemic norm.

Many forms of skepticism work this way, which is why I sometimes call it the “Standard Model” of a skeptical stance. Even philosophers alive to the way that Sextus bases suspension of judgment on dialectical ability seem to have difficulty resisting its influence. According to the translation of *Outlines* by Annas and Barnes,

The chief constitutive principle of scepticism is the *claim that* to every account an equal account is opposed... (PH1, 12, my emphasis).

As Bett notes, nothing in the Greek corresponds to “claim”. In his far better translation (114–5), the principle of skepticism is “every argument’s having an equal argument lying in opposition to it” (*to panti logoi logon ison antikesthai*): not a claim, but a *situation* reliably brought about by the skeptic’s peculiar ability. I don’t mean to be too picky here. Perhaps all Annas and Barnes have in mind by “claim” is Sextus’s description of the skeptic’s ability. But to say that the principle of skepticism *is* a claim, rather than the ability the claim describes, inevitably suggests that Pyrrhonism rests on an epistemological thesis.

Here is another example, from a justly acclaimed article by Myles Burnyeat. According to Burnyeat,

[W]e know perfectly well why it appears to the skeptic that any dogmatic claim has a contrary equally worthy of assent. It is the result of a set of arguments designed to show, compellingly, that this is the case.⁵

While recognizing that, in the first instance, Sextus bases suspension on an ability rather than an epistemological thesis, Burnyeat thinks that the skeptic’s confidence in the applicability needs justification, which the Modes supply. Morison’s reading of the Modes is a sophisticated variation on this theme. As Morison reads them, the Modes do not prove a skeptical thesis, so much as offer a readily applied template for orchestrating ‘oppositions’. However, the skeptic’s confidence in its applicability would not be easy to distinguish from the belief that Burnyeat attributes to him. Either way, the skeptic’s confidence gets a rational basis. But why suppose that that Sextus’s confidence in his ability needs *any* justification beyond, as he puts it “being able”? Why suppose that there is a general method for exercising it? As with any ability, confidence is born of its successful exercise. (I shall return to this point.)

Pyrrhonian skepticism can’t possibly conform to the Standard Model, on pain of falling to the logical objection. Sextus bases his (practical) skepticism on an ability precisely to avoid basing it on any philosophical thesis. Giving the ability *any* philosophical rationale would undercut his most fundamental point. At the same time, Sextus is keenly aware that the Modes could easily be taken to do just that, and in the chapters of *Outlines* 1 that precede the Modes, he repeatedly disavows commitment to theoretical skepticism. Not only that, in the chapters immediately *succeeding* the Modes, where the temptation to suppose that the

⁵ Burnyeat (1997).

Pyrrhonist is a theoretical skeptic will be most keenly felt, he returns to explaining why this is not so. The Modes are *framed* by explanations of how and why the Pyrrhonist affirms no general skeptical theses. This is hard to square with the thought that Sextus failed to see a problem.

It is worth stressing just how keen Sextus is on turning aside the logical objection. He begins *Outlines* 1 by dividing philosophers into three camps. Dogmatists say that they have found the truth, Academics say that it cannot be found, and Skeptics “are still investigating” (PH1, 3). As Bett notes, “being an inquirer is undeniably part of the skeptic’s self-image, built into the term ‘skeptic’ itself”. On the other hand, we might expect an inquirer to contribute views of his own, which Sextus never does. Bett finds this disappointing:

If “inquiry” simply means not having decided that one knows the truth or that the truth is undecidable, then the skeptic, as Sextus characterizes him, is indeed an inquirer. But the claim that the skeptic is “still investigating,” which is how Sextus introduces the notion of the skeptic as an inquirer, sounds as if it promises more than this; and that is the promise on which the rest of his work does not deliver (8).

I’m not sure that there is a problem here. True, Sextus does not engage in first-order inquiry. His question is whether those who do have managed to deliver what they promise: certain knowledge of the real nature of things. The tension dissipates if dogmatic philosophy is the *object* of Sextus’s inquiry. But for present purposes the vital point is that *the very first thing Sextus tell us about Pyrrhonism is that it does not depend on theoretical skepticism.*

If Sextus is not going to advance dogmatic theses of any kind—even skeptical theses—his book will not take the argumentative form usual in philosophy.⁶ This is his second point.

By way of preface, let us say that that on none of the matters to be discussed do we affirm that things certainly are just as we say they are: rather, we report descriptively (*historikos*) on each item according to how it appears to us at the time. (PH1.4)

Sextus’s idea of proceeding descriptively implies three contrasts. His work will be descriptive rather than *argumentative* or *justificatory*, descriptive rather than *explanatory*,⁷ and descriptive rather than *prescriptive*. On this last point, *Outlines* is notable for Sextus’s avoidance of normative vocabulary. While he often says that skeptics are driven to suspend judgment, he never says that this because this is what, in the light of their arguments, they ought to do.

The skeptic neither advances epistemological theses nor presupposes epistemic norms. Rather, he acquires, apparently inadvertently, a curious ability: the ability, when faced with some observation, claim or argument, to come up with something that opposes it. This could be an observation, a claim, or an argument: anything can be opposed to anything. All that matters is that the

⁶ Bett makes the interesting point that Sextus seems to be in two minds about calling himself a philosopher (15f).

⁷ That suspension of judgment leads to tranquillity is one of skepticism’s vital features, but all Sextus says is that it happens ‘fortuitously’ (PH1, 26).

opposing items be 'equipollent' in the sense of equally persuasive. By catching himself between two stools, the skeptic induces a state of indecision: a "standstill of the intellect" (PH1, 10). Bett says that *epoche*, which follows directly from setting things in opposition, is a "psychological effect rather than a rational conclusion" (PH1, 10). I wouldn't put it quite this way: after all, the skeptic's ability is *dialectical*. The essential point is that equipollence is intuitive, reflecting only the skeptic's personal sense of how far a claim is persuasive. Persuasiveness is an appearance, not the product of judgment. *Pace* Burnyeat, it does not appear to the skeptic "that any dogmatic claim has a contrary equally *worthy* of assent", at least if worthiness depends on commitment to some epistemic standard.

Having undercut the logical objection, Sextus turns to the *apraxia* objection. The critic supposes that the skeptics have no beliefs, in any sense of belief, about anything whatsoever. Not so: there is an ambiguity in "belief" (*doxa*), which bears on the scope of *epoche*:

When we say that Sceptics do not hold beliefs, we do not take 'belief' in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that belief is acquiescing to something; for Sceptics assent to the feeling forced on them by appearances—for example, they would not say, when heated or chilled, 'I think I am not heated (or: chilled)'. Rather, we say that they do not hold beliefs in the sense in which some say that belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences (PH1, 13).

The skeptic lives without beliefs (*adoxastos*) by living undogmatically (*adogmatikos*): that is, avoiding all theoretical commitments. (Sextus seems to use the terms interchangeably.) He wastes no time in pointing out that theoretical skepticism is just such a commitment:

Not even in uttering the Sceptical phrases about unclear matters—for example 'In no way more', or 'I determine nothing', or one of the other phrases which we shall later discuss—do they hold beliefs. For if you hold beliefs, then you posit as real the things you are said to hold beliefs about; but sceptics posit these phrases not as being necessarily real. For they suppose that, just as the phrase 'Everything is false' says that it too, along with everything else, is false..., so also 'In no way more' says that it too, along with everything else, is no more so than not so, and hence cancels itself along with everything else (PH1, 14).

Theoretical skepticism could not be the basis of the skeptic's method since it is self-refuting. The logical objection is turned against the objector.

Sextus further emphasizes the skeptic's avoidance of theoretical commitments by addressing the question of whether skeptics belong to a school. In one way, they don't, though in another they do.

If you say that a school involves adherence to a number of beliefs ..., and if you say that belief is assent to something unclear, then we shall say that the Sceptics do not belong to any school. But if you count as a school a persuasion which, to all appearances, coheres with some account ... showing how it is possible to live correctly (where correctly is taken not only with reference to virtue, but more loosely, and extends to the

ability to suspend judgment,)— in that case we say the sceptics do belong to a school (PH1, 16).

The skeptic comports himself in a way that, so far as he can tell, answers to a possible way to live. He may study natural science, but only as providing occasions for exercising his skeptical ability. Sextus adds, significantly, that this is “also the spirit in which we approach the logical and ethical parts of what they call philosophy” (PH1, 18). Since Sextus explicitly brings Logic (which includes what we think of as epistemology) within the scope of his skeptical ability, it is worth asking how and where he does so.

At this stage of *Outlines*, the Modes are just two chapters away. One chapter describes how the skeptic gets by in everyday life: as it turns out, like everyone else, or at least everyone not captured by philosophy. The other reports the skeptic’s unexpected discovery that suspension leads to the tranquillity he had hoped to achieve through theoretical inquiry. It is not easy to believe that Sextus could fail to notice that treating the Modes as arguments for theoretical skepticism would contradict a point he has repeatedly insisted on.

Sextus follows his presentation of the Modes with a discussion of the skeptical “phrases” or sayings, such as “No more” (PH1, 187f.). As noted, he has already insisted that such phrases are not endorsements of theoretical skepticism but now he offers a more extended discussion, suggesting other ways of taking them. The first is that they are not definite assertions that this or that matter is undecidable but expressions of or reports on the skeptic’s feeling of indecision (PH1, 190). Interestingly enough, Sextus make this point by first reiterating that the skeptic’s ability to induce *epoche* by orchestrating swings free of theoretical commitments in epistemology (“logic”). By “equipollence”, he reminds us, he means only “equality in what appears plausible to us” (PH1, 190). Faced with equipollent, conflicting claims, the skeptic may say “In no way more”. However,

... although the phrase ‘In no way more’ exhibits the distinctive character of assent or denial, we do not use it in this way: we use it in a loose way either for a question [‘presumably, What am I to think?’] or for ‘I do not know which of these I should assent to and which not assent to’ (PH1, 191).

A question is not an assertion at all; and a report on one’s feeling of being unable to decide is not an epistemic judgment on a question’s undecidability. What about “Everything is undetermined”? This is an assertion but not a dogmatic assertion. When a skeptic says this,

... he takes ‘is’ in the sense of ‘appears to me’; by ‘everything’ he means not whatever exists but those unclear matters investigated by Dogmatists which he has considered; and by ‘undetermined’ he means that they do not exceed what is opposed to ... them in convincingness or lack of convincingness (PH1, 198).

This saying is not a general epistemological thesis but a progress report: as far as he can tell, the skeptic’s ability has not yet let him down. Accordingly, the skeptic can say things like this to encourage himself to keep up his skepticism (PH1, 204).

In his final comment on the skeptical sayings, Sextus recurs to the point that the skeptical sayings “can be destroyed by themselves, being cancelled along with what they are applied to, just as purgative drugs do not merely drive the humours from the body but drive themselves out too along with the humours” (PH1, 206). In effect, Sextus shows that the logical objection is no problem for a skeptic seeking suspension of judgment. If the Pyrrhonian could argue convincingly for theoretical skepticism, he would not be able to assent to its conclusion. On no understanding do the skeptical sayings express assent to any skeptical theses. As I said at the outset, Sextus frames his discussion of the Modes with carefully developed explanations of how and why he is not a theoretical skeptic. This makes it hard to believe that Sextus didn’t see that his use of the Modes might be misunderstood.⁸

3. If the Modes present skeptical arguments but do not establish skeptical conclusions, what do they do?

Sextus offers a clue when, to complete his response to the *apraxia* objection, he explains what is involved in the skeptic’s ‘standard’ (*kriterion*) of acting. He begins by saying that ‘criterion’ (I shall use the English spelling), has two senses:

... there are standards adopted to provide conviction about the reality or unreality of something (we shall talk about these standards when we turn to attack them); and there are standards of action, according to which in everyday life we perform some actions and not others—and it is these standards which are our present subject (PH1, 21).

Call standards of the first kind ‘epistemic’ and of the second kind ‘practical’. Since theories of epistemic criteria are a major topic of *Outlines 2*, we might suppose that Sextus is looking forward to that book.⁹ I don’t find this a natural reading of the text. *Outlines 1* is carefully structured and gives every indication of being a self-contained overview of Pyrrhonian fundamentals: the later books will go into details. Sextus is more naturally taken as referring to later chapters of *Outlines 1*. If so, Sextus’s turn to destroying theoretical criteria can only be in the Modes. The Modes must problematize, in general way, the very idea of a theoretical a criterion. Why in a general way? Why doesn’t Sextus content himself with the examination of particular theories of the criterion that he undertakes in *Outlines 2*?

A partial answer to this question is that Sextus mostly uses Modal tropes in contexts that concern epistemological issues, a point I made quite some time ago.¹⁰ Bett concurs, noting that the point seems not to have received much attention (125, n.42). Now as Bett says, these applications mostly involve tropes drawn from the Five Modes. But, as I noted, Sextus does not present the Ten

⁸ Having dealt with the skeptical sayings, Sextus takes pains to distinguish skepticism from philosophical views that might be confused with it: those of Heraclitus, Democritus, the Cyrenaics, and Protagoras. In each case, he makes the point that although these philosophers say skeptical-sounding pronouncements, they do so on the basis of dogmatic commitments. His discussion of Heraclitus is notable for a remark on Aenesidemus, who is said to have held that “the Sceptical persuasion is a path to the philosophy of Heraclitus”. Since Sextus repudiates this claim, he clearly does not see the originator of the Ten Modes as an oracle or even a true skeptic. He has most to say about his closest rivals, the Academics, but to discuss these remarks would take us too far afield.

⁹ As Annas and Barnes assume (p. 9, n. 39).

¹⁰ Williams (1988), p. 578.

Modes in their original form. Effectively, he subordinates the Ten to the Five. That he would make most explicit use of the tropes from the Five is therefore no surprise. They do the heavy lifting.

Sextus gives the Five Modes a definite order of application:

... first, the mode deriving from dispute; second, the mode of throwing one back *ad infinitum*; third, the mode deriving from relativity; fourth, the hypothetical mode; fifth, the reciprocal mode.

This order is unlikely to be accidental, since Diogenes Laertius also follows it.¹¹ But it can seem puzzling. Why does Sextus insist on five Modes, when contemporary epistemologists focus on the three that make up “Agrippa’s Trilemma”: infinite regress, the hypothetical mode (assumption) and the reciprocal mode (circular reasoning)? Robert Fogelin suggests dividing the Five into two subgroups: “challenging” (dispute and relativity) and “dialectical (the trilemma).”¹² The challenging modes trigger a demand for justification, which in light of the trilemma can seem impossible to satisfy. While there is something to this, it doesn’t sit easily with Sextus’s order. If this is how Sextus sees the Five Modes, why doesn’t Relativity follow Dispute, rather than being separated from it by Regress. If the point of the “challenging” Modes is to trigger a demand for justification why bring in Relativity at all?¹³ Why does Sextus (though not Diogenes) mention Regress twice? Bett makes a further relevant point: that although contemporary discussions make the skeptical problem turn on the trilemma (as does Fogelin’s reading of the Five), Sextus shows little inclination to apply them in this systematic way, using all five together only once. Why?¹⁴ I suggest that we can get a clearer understanding of Sextus’s presentation of the Five Modes by looking at how he incorporates elements from the Five in his account of the Ten.

The Ten Modes, Sextus tells us, fall under three “superordinate Modes”, according to whether they concern the subject judging (the first four), the object judged (seven and ten) or both (five, six, eight and nine). The groups are not treated equally. In two ways, the Modes concerning the subject come in for special attention. One is the sheer amount of attention they receive. The Ten Modes take up one hundred and twenty-eight sections of *Outlines* 1. Eighty-eight of these—more than two thirds—are devoted to the first five, with eighty-three given over to the first four. The first Mode alone occupies thirty-eight sections, only one fewer than the sixth through the tenth taken together. The second way in which the first four get special treatment is that they involve elements from the Five, though they are not the only one to get this: so too does the fifth Mode (positions, intervals and places). This is partially accounted by the Fifth Mode’s being a “combined” Mode and so involving the subject. But only partially, since the other combined Modes do not receive this more elaborate development. I shall offer some speculations as to why this might be. But first we need to examine the argumentative structure found only in the first five.

In the First Mode, Sextus argues that it is plausible to think that the world appears differently to different animals, on account of difference in their sensory organs. The question on the table is which animal’s appearances should be seen as

¹¹ I am grateful to Richard Bett for calling my attention to this point.

¹² Fogelin (1994, p. 116).

¹³ Barnes (1990: 113) argues that it shouldn’t be there.

¹⁴ For Bett’s discussion of this point, see p. 122f.

the measure (criterion) of truth, and Sextus seems to think that it has no obvious answer. As human beings, philosophers naturally favor human appearances. Supposing they are right, the Second Mode raises the question of which human beings should be the judges of truth (“appearances” do not have to be only perceptual appearances), given the variety of opinions about the true nature of the world? If we can settle which human beings to trust, we are faced with the Third Mode: what faculty or method should they rely on? If we can answer this, the Fourth Mode notes that human beings find themselves in varying conditions— young or old, healthy or sick, awake or dreaming—leading to the question, which condition should be preferred? Even given an answer to this question, the Fifth Mode notes that objects present different appearances from different angles of view, when differently placed, or at different times: what are the proper settings for determining which appearances reveal how objects really are?

Now although Sextus says that skepticism is an ability “to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all”, things which appear are not—cannot be—occurrent appearances, which are after all a key component in the skeptic’s practical criterion. Occurrent appearances cannot even be compared: *a fortiori* they cannot be brought into opposition. Sextus himself makes this point in the fourth Mode:

[A] waking person cannot compare the appearances of sleepers with those of people who are awake, or a healthy person those of the sick with those of the healthy; for we assent to what is present and affects us in the present rather than to what is not present (PH1, 113).

In everyday life we instinctively trust present appearances in that we act on them: the Modes belong to philosophical inquiry. When appearances are not present, we can ask which appearances are guides to the reality of things. Furthermore, in the first four Modes, Sextus is not much interested in particular ways things appear, which may not be known: it is likely that things appear differently to different animals, though we have no direct knowledge of exactly how.¹⁵ Sextus’s focus is on factors that can plausibly be thought to systematically influence how things appear. We are not dealing directly with disputes about the nature of things, as in physics: we are asking how or whether the nature of things can be grasped. The Ten Modes raise a fundamental question for Logic: is there, or could there even be, a theoretical Criterion? The first five do so in a systematic way by progressively narrowing the focus: differences between creatures, individuals (or groups), faculties, conditions, and places and times. For the first four—the subject Modes—Diogenes unsurprisingly repeats Sextus’s order, though his fifth Mode is Sextus’s tenth. Sextus has the superior order.

The oppositions exploited in the first five of the Ten Modes are only the first step in the skeptic’s argument. The appeal to conflicting appearances leads at most to an apparent *Relativity Lemma*, puzzling but perhaps not to the point of inducing *epoche*. This is where tropes from the Five Modes make their presence felt. Sextus continues the argument of the first Mode:

¹⁵ In the Tenth Mode, Sextus gives many examples of differences in laws and customs. However, this Mode is special in at least two ways. First, these differences concern beliefs of ordinary people and not just philosophers. Secondly, in matters of which actions are acceptable and which not, it is not clear that all philosophers think that there is an underlying reality or a real nature. Such things may belong to *nomos* rather than *physis*.

[I]f same objects appear dissimilar depending on the variation among animals, then we shall be able to say what the existing objects are like as observed by us, but as to what they are like in their nature we shall suspend judgment. For we shall not be able ourselves to decide between our own appearances and those of other animals, being ourselves part of the dispute and for that reason more in need of someone to decide than ourselves able to judge (PH1, 59).

Sextus elaborates this argument to further clarify his account of how *epoche* is induced:

[W]e shall not be able to prefer our own appearances to other animals either without giving a proof or by giving a proof. For ... the so-called proof will itself be either apparent to us or not apparent. If it is not apparent, then we shall not bring it forward with confidence. But if it is apparent to us, then since what is being investigated is what is apparent to animals, and the proof is apparent to us, and we are animals, then the proof itself will be under investigation, through the matter under investigation, since the same thing will then be both convincing and unconvincing (convincing insofar as it aims to offer a proof, unconvincing insofar as it is being proved) which is impossible (PH1, 60-61).

While Sextus does not mention them by name, he is clearly invoking two of the Five Modes: hypothesis and the reciprocal Mode. Each of the first five of the Ten Modes follows this dialectical strategy. Systematically conflicting appearances confront us with the problem of the criterion; tropes from the Five make it appear insoluble. Sextus varies the tropes he appeals to, but all three horns of the trilemma make an appearance.

If this is right, mustn't we say that the Ten Modes offer a sequence of arguments for theoretical skepticism, taking us back to our original problem? Not exactly: as we saw, Sextus takes the Modes them as raising a question rather than establishing a thesis. Since it is, after all, natural to feel that there must be a theoretical criterion, it is enough for the skeptic to create a state of indecision, which so far he has not seen a way to resolve; and if they were to be treated as establishing something, they would oppose themselves. But we say more: Sextus's use of tropes from the Five Modes in the most highly developed members of the Ten suggests a reading of the Five that accounts for both for their order and their relation to his method of opposition. As I read them, the Five Modes present in a general the dialectical strategy we have found in the first five of the Ten. The Modes are introduced after the skeptic has described his dialectical ability. This induces *epoche* without presupposing any epistemological standards: the poles of an opposition have to be intuitively equally plausible or persuasive. But no philosophical argument is likely to end here. In any area of philosophy, when faced with *epoche* induced by equipollent dispute, a dogmatist (who may only be the skeptic himself, managing any residual dogmatic inclinations of his own) will look for reasons to disturb the balance, raising the threat of an infinite regress of reasons. Since producing an actual infinity of reasons is impossible, any argument he gives will involve treating some of his premises as evidently true. In so doing so he will be presupposing a criterion: any dispute will eventually rise to the epistemological level. But once the dogmatist's criterion is made explicit, considerations concerning systematically conflicting appearances pose the

relativity problem, which the Modes of hypothesis and reciprocity seem to make insoluble. This process tracks the order of the Five Modes, as Sextus initially introduces them (PH1, 164):

Dispute (method of opposition) → *epoche* → attempt to give reasons → threat of *Infinite Regress* → reliance (perhaps only implicit) on a theoretical criterion → *Relativity* (via consideration of conflicting appearances) → *Hypothesis* or *Reciprocity*.

This corresponds to the way that first four of the Ten Modes block any escape from dialectically-induced *epoche*. However, in the fifth of the Ten, Sextus introduces Infinite Regress as an option at the final stage, so we get:

Dispute (method of opposition) → *epoche* → attempt to give reasons → threat of *Infinite Regress* → reliance (perhaps only implicit) on a theoretical criterion → *Relativity* (via consideration of conflicting appearances) → *Infinite Regress* or *Hypothesis* or *Reciprocity*.

This corresponds to Sextus's more extended account of the Five Modes that follows their introduction (PH1, 165-70).

If I am right about this, we can see how Sextus can argue for skeptical conclusions without compromising his claim that skepticism rests on a dialectical ability. The function of the Modes is to block any attempt to escape the skeptic's ability-induced *epoche* by appealing to Logic (epistemology), a move which a dogmatist will eventually make anyway, if only by implication. Sextus says exactly this in his discussion of time in Outlines 3. He begins by noting that dogmatists say many things about time. These cannot all be true, though no dogmatist will admit that all are false. He then adds:

Nor is it possible to apprehend which are true and which false both because of the equipollent dispute and because of the impasse (*aporia*) with respect to standards and proofs. (PH 3, 139-40.)

The conflicting theories of time are more or less plausible and we cannot disturb the equipollent dispute by giving reasons because appealing to standards (criteria) and proofs will only lead to further puzzlement. The Modes have indicated how this happens.

To appreciate how Sextus can traffic in skeptical argumentation without compromising his claim that skepticism rests on a dialectical ability, it is vital to avoid viewing the Five Modes from the standpoint of contemporary epistemological discussion, in which the trilemma is taken to pose a freestanding and fully general epistemological problem. (Though usually called "the regress problem", it is driven by the trilemma, since the skeptical challenge is to block the regress without making unjustified assumptions or reasoning in a circle.)¹⁶ In sharp contrast to our contemporary understanding, Sextus subordinates the modes of Regress, Hypothesis and Reciprocity, along with Relativity (which plays

¹⁶ Fogelin (1994, p. 114).

no part in the current “regress” problem) to the Mode of Dispute, thus ultimately to the skeptic’s dialectical ability. Dispute and the reason-giving it provokes arise with respect to the non-evident matters that are the business of philosophy. This accords well with Bett’s observation that Sextus is reluctant to use the Modes of Regress, Hypothesis and Reciprocity in concert: he doesn’t want to make his strategy look too much like an insoluble, freestanding problem (125). Sextus does not recognize the generalized regress problem. Nor does he have any reason to. This is because he does not treat everyday assent as reason-based but rather as grounded in natural reactions.¹⁷ Of course, if anyone were to say that our everyday experience of the world reveals things in their real natures, making metaphysics out of common sense (as perhaps Moore did), the skeptical dialectic could get started. But it would have no impact on everyday life.

A final point. My claim that the Modes frustrate attempts to disturb equipollence by raising the dispute to the epistemological level only works for disputes in physics or ethics. What about logic: in particular, what about theories of the criterion? The answer is that the same strategy applies. When Sextus turns to particular specific theories of the criterion, he doesn’t just cite the Modes and leave it at that. Though he involves the Modes on occasion, he also finds particular problems. However, he insists that his basic approach remains that of orchestrating oppositions:

You must realize that it is not our intention to assert that standards of truth are unreal (that would be dogmatic); rather, since the Dogmatists seem plausibly to have established that there is a standard of truth, we have set up plausible-seeming counter-arguments in opposition to them, affirming neither that they are true nor that they are more plausible than those on the contrary side, but concluding with suspension of judgment because of the apparent equal plausibility of these arguments and those produced by the Dogmatists. (PH2, 79.)¹⁸

Sextus is on strong ground here. It is hard to believe that there are no standards of truth, especially for philosophers. For the most part, philosophers who take skeptical arguments seriously find skeptical conclusions impossible to accept, even though there is still no agreement as to how the arguments go wrong.

Certainly, the problem of the Modes could use a philosophical resolution, but have I shown that Sextus provides one, or that there is really no problem at all? The textual evidence is not sufficient to settle the question. But there is enough of it to suggest that Sextus had a least some grasp of what is required.

References

- ANNAS J. e BARNES, J. 2000. *Sextus Empiricus. Outlines of Scepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- BARNES, J. 1990. *The Toils of Scepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁷ That Sextus fails to pay sufficient attention to reason-giving in everyday life comes out in his discussion of the Academic doctrine of the tested impression. See Williams (2014), p. 24f.

¹⁸ I have replaced the non-idiomatic “concluding to” of Annas and Barnes by “concluding with”.

- BETT, Richard. 2019. *How to be a Pyrrhonist: the Practice and Significance of Pyrrhonian Skepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- BURNEYAT, M. 1997a. Can the sceptic live his scepticism?. In: Burnyeat, M. e Frede, M. (1997), p. 25-57.
- DIOGENES LAERTIUS, *Lives of the Philosophers*, translated by Pamela Mensch and edited by James Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2018), Bk. 9,104 (p. 484).
- FOGELIN, R. 1994. *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MORISON, Benjamin. 2011. "The Logical Structure of the Sceptic's Opposition". *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 40: 264-295.
- STRIKER, Gisela. 1996. "The Ten Tropes of Aenesidemus". In: *Essays in Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 116-134.
- WILLIAMS, Michael. 1988. "Skepticism Without Theory". *Review of Metaphysics*, 41: 547-588.
- WILLIAMS, Michael. 2014. "The Agrippan Problem, Then and Now", *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 4 (2014), pp. 1-27.