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Pyrrhonism and Protagoreanism

Catching Sextus Out?

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Some Preliminaries

This paper is about Pyrrhonism, an ancient form of scepticism, specifically the Pyrrhonism of Sextus Empiricus, mainly as expounded in his work _Outlines of Pyrrhonism_ (= PH). Ancient scepticism differs from modern scepticism in ways which have been widely discussed. In one sense, it is more extreme. It aims at the eradication of belief, not merely knowledge. Scholars divide on the question of whether the Pyrrhonist seeks to eradicate all beliefs whatsoever or simply a subset of beliefs: as it might be, philosophical or scientific beliefs.¹

We shall endeavour to remain neutral on this interpretative issue. Ancient scepticism is also widely, although not universally, held not to adopt the modern sceptical policy of insulating our ordinary, everyday beliefs and judgements from the effects of philosophical scepticism.² On any view, ancient scepticism is advocated as a way of life, one of several ways of life competing in the Hellenistic philosophical market, offering a route to tranquillity and a cure for mental disturbance. The medical model is important to the Pyrrhonist’s self-understanding, for he sees himself as a therapist, as the close of the _Outlines of Pyrrhonism_ makes clear:

The Sceptic, being a philanthropic sort, wishes to cure by argument, to the best of his ability, the pretension and temerity of the Dogmatists. (PH III.280, tr. Barnes)³

The medical character of Pyrrhonism — and its philanthropic ambitions — is also important for an understanding of the nature of the _Outlines of Pyrrhonism_ as a work. It is, as it were, a sales pitch, advertising the nature and effectiveness of Pyrrhonism as a way of life, even if the Pyrrhonist’s philosophy is such that he will avoid dogmatising about the claims of his art.

In the ways described above ancient scepticism seems more extreme than its modern descendant. However, there is also a sense in which it looks less

ambitious in scope. The ancient sceptic does not mount a global assault on the very possibility of the existence of anything or anyone outside his own mental experience. These two different contrasts are no doubt related. It is the latter contrast – the ancient sceptic’s apparently unquestioning acceptance of the existence of an external world – that is more closely related to our project.

Sextus begins the *Outlines on Pyrrhonism* by drawing his own contrast between Pyrrhonism and its contemporary rivals.

Those who investigate any subject are likely either to make a discovery, or to deny the possibility of discovery and agree that nothing can be apprehended, or else to persist in their investigations. That, no doubt, is why of those who undertake philosophical investigations some say that they have discovered the truth, others deny the possibility of apprehending it, and others are still pursuing their investigations. Those who are properly called dogmatists – such as the Aristotelians and Epicurus and the Stoics and others – think they have discovered the truth; Cleitomachus and Carneades and other Academic philosophers have said that the truth cannot be apprehended; and the sceptics persist in their investigations. (PH 1.1–3 tr. Annas & Barnes)

The Pyrrhonist begins his investigations like other philosophers of his time, inquiring into truth. And, in Sextus’ environment, truth here is correspondence, true of the world; the framework he adopts is straightforwardly realist. Dogmatist inquirers – both positive and negative – reach some conclusion. Properly speaking, dogmatists are those whose inquiry terminates in a claim to have discovered the truth. Academics – at least according to Sextus – assert the negative dogma that the truth cannot be discovered, and so make further inquiry pointless. Only the Pyrrhonist never finishes his inquiry and can claim to be a perpetual inquirer.

The operational procedure for the practice of Pyrrhonism which Sextus will go on to describe does have a termination. He describes a sceptical journey which ends, first, in suspension of judgement or assent – the withholding of any commitment to the matter under inquiry having been settled one way or another. Suspension of judgement is followed, as luck would have it, by the very tranquillity of mind the skeptic had previously hoped to achieve through the discovery of truth (PH 1.12). However, such suspension of judgement is at least meant to be compatible with endlessly ongoing inquiry. And endless inquiry should be compatible with present peace of mind. The Pyrrhonist withdraws from the active and anxious pursuit of the truth of the matter at hand. But he claims neither to have discovered the truth, nor that the truth can never be discovered.

Appearance and Reality: A Sceptical Commitment?

So much for the scene setting: now the argument. Put briefly, the line of thought which lies behind this paper is this. The system of scepticism outlined by Sextus in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* I seems committed to a gap (not just a

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**Pyrroponism and Proteas**

... distinction) between appearance and reality (a clearer in time.) But the sceptic is keenly aware that philosophical commitments of this sort have philosophical commitments of this sort. The commitment which could be dislodged is the commitment which could be dislodged, as the way to get rid of commitment, in the commitment.

The first task is to assemble the evidence. In PH 1.8, Sextus describes it as a

Scepticism is an ability which is not to be judged by any way whatsoever, with the exception of the objects and reasons opportunity (προφαίνει), and afterwards the evidence (PH 1.8)

The sceptical pattern for being led astray follows. Start with conflicting appearances, including, the thoughts one might have, as strictly perceptual impressions. These appearances are appearances that something is the case, but they debate about the scope of Pyrrhonism. Appearance the sceptic may be led to accept appearances are epistemic or not. But the appearance of the start of his pattern are appearances that are.

Once faced with conflicting appearances, Sextus would say: by opposing these conflicting appearances. Owing to their equal weight the sceptic, as Sextus puts it; like a shadow following stages of the journey may be thought to one may describe them as things he finds that the source of tranquillity is described as some ‘guess at chance’ (PH 1.29) – this without doubt of occurrence. This is not a once and for all, recall, is an inquirer, both at the beginning of the journey the sceptic may make
doubt, is an inquirer, both at the beginning of the journey the sceptic may make. But recall, is an inquirer, both at the beginning of the sceptical journey illustrates what they think for each subject matter of inquiry, etc.

If a conflict of appearances is not resolved, one. Means of generating conflicting appearances, which Sextus describes, modes usually used by Aenesdesian modes as a library of appearances to help the sceptic generate conflicting appearances. This provides a number of grounds for suggesting that one kind of animal may differ from the other.

The sceptic’s pattern requires transition from conflicting appearances...
Sceptical Commitment?

This is the key argument. Put briefly, the line of argument is as follows. The system of scepticism outlined by Sextus contains commitments to a gap (not just a

distinction) between appearance and reality. (What we mean by this should be clearer in time.) But the sceptic is keen to avoid having commitments—certainly philosophical commitments of this sort. So, our questions are: whether this is a commitment; what the commitment might be; and whether it is the kind of commitment which could be dislodged in the way the sceptic himself advertises as the way to get rid of commitments, be they his own or others'.

The first task is to assemble the grounds for identifying a possible commitment. In PH I.8, Sextus describes scepticism as follows:

Scepticism is an ability which is capable of opposing appearances and judgements in any way whatsoever, with the result that, owing to the equal weight (isosthēsia) of the objects and reasons opposed, we are brought, first, to suspension of judgement (apokrisiōn), and afterwards to lack of disturbance or tranquillity (apatheia). (PH I.8)

The sceptical pattern for being led to suspension of judgement is thus as follows. Start with conflicting appearances. ‘Appearances’ here has a very wide sense, including the thoughts one may have on non-perceptual matters as well as strictly perceptual impressions. Further, at least at this stage, appearances are appearances that something is the case, or epistemic appearances. The debate about the scope of Pyrrhonism is, in part, a debate about whether any appearances the sceptic may be left with, once having suspended judgement, are epistemic or not. But the appearances on which the sceptic sets to work at the start of his pattern are appearances which make a claim as to how things are.

Once faced with conflicting appearances, the sceptical pattern continues by opposing these conflicting appearances such that they are of equal weight. Owing to their equal weight the sceptic suspends judgement. Tranquillity follows, as Sextus puts it, ‘like a shadow follows a body’ (PH I.29). Whereas the previous stages of the journey may be thought of as things the sceptic does (albeit he may describe them as things he finds himself compelled to do), the achievement of tranquillity is described as something that simply happens to him, ‘as if by chance’ (PH I.29) — this without detracting from the implied regularity of its occurrence. This is not a once and for all journey, but the general pattern of the journey the sceptic may make over and over again. The sceptic, we may recall, is an inquirer, both at the beginning and at the end of his journey. The sceptical journey illustrates what the sceptic does — and what happens to him — for each subject matter of inquiry, on each occasion of inquiry.

If a conflict of appearances is not immediately given, the sceptic can generate one. Means of generating conflicting appearances are collected into Ten Modes which Sextus describes, modes usually ascribed to Aenesidemus. Think of the Aenesideman modes as a library of arguments and argument patterns designed to help the sceptic generate conflicts of appearances. So, for example, mode 1 provides a number of grounds for supposing that the way things appear to one kind of animal may differ from the way they appear to another kind of animal.

The sceptic’s pattern requires two supplements. The first is to secure the transition from conflicting appearances to their equal weight. The sceptic must
thing appears to me, so it is for me, and for you’ (Tht 152a6–7). To cash this out, 
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men also are, and what appears to no man 
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6 For the moment, we follow the pure Plato 
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both appearances ‘underlie in matter’ (PH I 
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Two Protagoreans and the Pyrrhonist

Protagoras claimed that ‘man is the measure: of the things that are that [or, 
how] they are and of the things that are not that [or, how] they are not’ (Plato, 
Tht 152a2–4; cf. PH I.216). And Plato describes this as the claim that ‘as each

4 For an example of this use of the Agrippan modes to demonstrate our inability to resolve an 
thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as each thing appears to you, so it is for you' (Tht 152a6–7). To cash this out within the framework of a correspondence theory of truth, Plato draws on a Heraclitean ontology according to which all things are in constant flux. In effect, he privatises each person’s reality in line with their privately measured appearances. For our purposes, it does not matter whether this is an accurate representation of the position of the historical Protagoras. Sextus himself refers to Protagoras’ views on several occasions (e.g., PH I.216ff, M VII.48, 60ff, 369, 388ff). And his view of Protagoras has all the elements of the Platonic account: the measure doctrine, relativism and the connection to a theory of flux. Discrepancies between individual characterisations leave room for two somewhat different versions of his Platonic-inspired picture of Protagoras. These variants simply offer alternatives for the argument to come, without affecting its outcome. We shall discuss them below.

The difference between the Protagorean and the Pyrrhonian is this. Take a classic case of conflicting appearances from the Theaetetus itself: the wind feels cold to one of us, but warm to the other, a conflict of appearances in Aenesidemian mode 2 based on differences between humans. Like the Pyrrhonian, the Protagorean thinks that these conflicting appearances are of equal weight, in the sense that nothing could decide between them. Unlike the Pyrrhonian, the reason the Protagorean thinks this is that the Protagorean contends that there is nothing more to decide: the wind really is cold for one of us and warm for the other. The Protagorean moves directly from each appearance to the reality of the weather’s way the wind is relative to each of us. There is no further question to ask about the real temperature of the wind.

The sceptic, by moving directly from the equal weight of conflicting appearances to suspension of judgement, appears to assume that there is a legitimate question to ask about the real temperature of the wind which the appearances do not settle and which the sceptic finds himself unable to answer. And it is this assumption which looks like a commitment to some kind of gap between appearance and reality. Recall that the appearances on which the sceptic sets to work are epistemic appearances, appearances which make a claim on how things are. The sceptic suspends judgement on how things are. He does not doubt that there is a way things are. Recall too that the sceptic is characterised

5 In brief, the discrepancies are due to the fact that there is only one place in which Sextus clearly includes as part of Protagoras’ position the view that what appears relatively to someone is relatively to that person, namely in M VII.60. This, it seems, is precisely the Platonic picture. Consider, however, PH I.216–219, which is perhaps the fullest statement of Protagoras’ view, and the only one to link it to an ontology of flux. Although this passage treats appearances as relative, it suggests that matter, in flux, is non-relatively all (and only) the things that appear to men. Interpretatively speaking, the tricky sentence is in PH I.219: ‘all the things that appear to men also are, and what appears to no man also is not.’ These look very like instances of a naked, non-relative verb ‘to be’.

6 For the moment, we follow the pure Platonic version of Protagoras in Sextus in which being is relativised in line with appearance. If PH I has a variant picture (see above note), it is still the case that, given the conflicting appearances, there is nothing more to decide. The ‘reasons’ (λόγοι) for both appearances ‘underlie in matter’ (PH I.218), and hence both conflicting appearances also are.
as the person who keeps on inquiring (PH I.1, quoted above). Even having suspended judgement, the matter for inquiry remains an open question, which has been neither settled nor refused. 7 Herein lies the contrast with the Protagorean, for whom no question remains. The point of the contrast is not that the Pyrrhonist assumes that there is such a thing as the wind, but rather that, given this assumption, he makes a further assumption about the relation between the wind and its impression upon us: that the wind may differ, in this case in temperature, from the way it appears. This assumption is fundamental to the operational procedure described in PH I, and also to Sextus’ application of this procedure in the three broad areas of dogmatic philosophy – logic, physics and ethics – in the second and third books of PH and throughout the several books of his work Against the Professors (= M). 9

How should this putative commitment be described? (We say ‘putative’ not because we are hesitant about the role played by this assumption in the sceptic’s procedure, but rather because we have yet to address the difficult question of the sceptic’s ownership of the implications of his argumentation.) There are at least two ways in which a contrast between appearance and reality might be drawn. One might draw what we shall call a ‘conceptual distinction’. This might be interpreted ontologically, as the claim that appearances are one kind of thing, reality another. A sense-datum theorist might be an example of someone who interprets the distinction this way. The conceptual distinction might also be interpreted perspectively. Appearances are the way the world appears to me or to any other observer. Reality is the world, considered independently of the perspective of an observer. These two interpretations of the conceptual distinction are not incompatible, as stated. But it is possible to interpret the distinction perspective without supposing that appearances and reality are ontologically distinct.

In addition to the conceptual distinction, one might also draw what we shall call a ‘content distinction’ between appearance and reality. The content distinction itself employs a conceptual distinction between appearance and reality, but takes a further position on the possibility for slippage between the way things appear and the way they are in reality. To draw a content distinction between appearance and reality is to suppose that it is at least possible that things are in reality other than they appear. (We will say something about the modality in due course.)

Where does the Pyrrhonist appear to stand on these distinctions? We take it that the Pyrrhonist does employ a conceptual distinction between appearance and reality, although we agree with both Burnyeat and Everson, who have argued, if not in these terms, that the Pyrrhonist does not interpret this distinction ontologically. 9 Likewise Protagoras, whose position might appear to come

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7 This seems the most plausible interpretation of the sense in which the sceptic keeps on inquiring, that the matter remains an open question. Cf. Burnyeat (1980), pp. 51–2.
Even having already identified some open questions, we can now turn to the question of how the contrast with the Protagoreanism works. The point of the contrast is not that the COP and appearance are the same as the wind, but rather that, given the assumption about the relation between appearance and wind, the wind may differ, in this case in a way that is fundamental to the nature of the arguments and also to Sextus’ application of this conception of the relationship of appearance to reality. The question is vital for understanding the nature of the argument and the possibility of a conceptual distinction fundamental to the arguments and the possibility of a conceptual distinction fundamental to the arguments.

The question is how the assumption that appearances are one kind of appearance and reality might be identified with a ‘conceptual distinction.’ This might suggest that appearances are one kind of appearance and reality might be identified with a ‘conceptual distinction.’ This might suggest that appearances are one kind of appearance and reality might be identified with a ‘conceptual distinction.’

Both the commitment to the content distinction and its denial are modal, and the modality needs explanation. What the sceptic looks committed to is the possibility that things may in reality be other than they appear. But, of course, the sceptic would not rule out the possibility that things may in reality be other than they appear.

Since the contrast between the Protagoreanism and the Pyrrhonist and its implications are central to our argument, it warrants elaboration. The difference between the Protagoreanism and the Pyrrhonist can be expressed in terms of the difference in their attitudes to conflicts of appearances. The Protagoreanism feels no compunction to resolve or adjudicate conflicts of appearances. However, this acceptance of conflict may be expressed in two rather different ways, depending upon which of Sextus’ characterisations of Protagoras one employs. The Point of the contrast is not that the COP and appearance are the same as the wind, but rather that, given the assumption about the relation between appearance and wind, the wind may differ, in this case in a way that is fundamental to the nature of the arguments and also to Sextus’ application of this conception of the relationship of appearance to reality. The question is vital for understanding the nature of the argument and the possibility of a conceptual distinction fundamental to the arguments.

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Consider first what, in honour of the Theaetetus’ characterisation, we may call...
the ‘Platonic Protagorean’. In M VII.60, Sextus characterises Protagoras' view in precisely Platonic terms: truth is relative and whatever appears to someone also is in relation to that person. Thus, if $p$ appears to be the case to $a$, then $p$ is the case for $a$. And, since man is the measure both of things that are and of things that are not, ($p$) ($p$ is the case for someone if it appears to someone that $p$).Appearances and (relativised) reality stand in a relation of mutual implication. Now suppose that $p$ appears to be the case to $a$ and that not-$p$ appears to be the case to $b$. Because of the mutual implication of appearance and reality, we may infer both that $p$ is the case for $a$ and that not-$p$ is the case for $b$. The conflict is accepted, but relativised. If both $p$ and not-$p$ appear to be the case, then both $p$ and not-$p$ are indeed the case, in the suitably relativised private realities the Theaetetus presents.

Next consider what, for reasons which will become apparent, we may call the ‘Paraconsistent Protagorean’. In PH I.216–9, Sextus offers a somewhat different characterisation of Protagoras' views, which appears not to relativise reality in line with relative appearances. Thus: ‘all the things that appear to men also are, and things that appear to no man also are not’ (PH I.219). Notice, again, that appearances and reality stand in a relation of mutual implication: ($p$) ($p$ iff there is someone to whom it appears the case that $p$). However, in the case of the Paraconsistent Protagorean, conflict is accepted without being relativised.

Suppose again that $p$ appears to be the case to $a$ and that not-$p$ appears to be the case to $b$. Because of the mutual implication between appearance and reality, we may now infer (p and not-$p$). We thus have a flat denial of the (classical) Law of Non-Contradiction; hence our choice of label for this Protagorean.$^{11}$

Both Protagorans accept conflict, although in different ways. Both do so because they place appearances and reality in a relation of mutual entailment. Thus, the reason the Protagorean, of either stamp, feels no compunction to resolve or adjudicate conflicts of appearances is precisely that the Protagorean denies what we call the content distinction. On the Protagorean’s view, it is impossible that reality is other than it appears.

This might be shown more formally as follows. Let “$\forall ap$” mean “$a$ has the impression that $p$” and “$\forall ap$” mean “$p$ is the case for $a$”. The two Protagorans’ respective commitments to the mutual implication between appearance and reality might be put as follows:

(i) the Platonic Protagorean: ($x$)$\neg(p \rightarrow \phi_{p,x})$
(ii) the Paraconsistent Protagorean: ($p$)($p \rightarrow \exists x(\phi_{p,x})$)

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$^{11}$ The leading proponent of paraconsistent logic is Graham Priest; see his (1987). There is, of course, a difference between the modern paraconsistent logician and the Paraconsistent Protagorean, for the Protagorean is utterly undiscriminating in their acceptance of contradiction; contradictions may – indeed must – be accepted whenever there are or may be conflicting appearances. Suppose, however, that one accepted Sainsbury’s description of a motivation for paraconsistency in his (forthcoming): in cases in which ‘we have apparently excellent arguments for $P$ and also apparently excellent arguments for not-$P$, we should ‘allow that apparent excellence is real excellence’ (p. 1). The sceptic supposes that we find ourselves in just such a situation whenever we inquire. Paraconsistency offers an alternative to the sceptic’s approach to this situation.

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Pyrrohism and Protagorean.

Each can be shown to entail a different form of denial: the former, that someone has the case that $p$.

For the Platonic Protagorean: from (i) it follows that ($x$)$\neg(\phi_{p,x})$.

For the Paraconsistent Protagorean: from (ii) we may derive ($p$)($p \rightarrow \exists x(\phi_{p,x} \& \neg p)$).

The argument is not quite finished here, however, for its denial should be also. The modern, it is possible that reality is other than the appearances from (i) and (ii) are taken for the Platonic Protagorean (and not the Paraconsistent Protagorean), they may be understood as ($x$)$\neg(\phi_{p,x} \& \neg p)$ and “it is relatively. But, in general, if it is known to be false, it is impossible. Thus each constitutes a denial or, other than it appears in the form app.

Now consider Sextus. Suppose the not-$p$ appears to be the case to $b$. That is, such a conflict of appearances, for, or that conflict is decisive. But nor does he propose this to be true, relatively or not. Rather he says that: “a judgement is consistent with his conclusion, it is an open question which of two of Sextus’ refusal simply an appearance which implies a commitment to it may be other than.

Two questions remain, and they turn on the kind of appearance-reality conflict: the sceptic be said to be committed to (in)dislodged by sceptical means? The former is when, if one answers the first. Even if the sceptic’s answer to the content distinction, there are.

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$^{12}$ This latter derivation might look problematic.

However, assuming our Paraconsistent Protagorean holds that it is both true and false (cf. Priest 1987).

$^{13}$ Sometimes this refusal is explicit, including a Protagorans’ view: conflict, he says, is absurd (cf. VII.392); it would be absurd to allow the $p \& \neg p$; it is impossible for the same thing to be both true and false at the same time (cf. VII.I.52). Cf. Burnyeat (1980) p.24 for the possible instability of whether Sextus himself was clear about the distinction, for, even in M VII & VIII, Protagoras of a flat (non-relativised) acceptance.
Each can be shown to entail a denial of the situation the content distinction deems possible: that someone have the impression that \( p \) without it being the case that \( p \).

For the Platonic Protagoran: from (i) we may derive \((x)(p)(\phi_{p,x} \rightarrow p)\) from which it follows that \((x)(p) \rightarrow (\phi_{p,x} \& \neg p)\). For the Paraconsistent Protagorean: from (ii) we may derive \((p)(3x(\phi_{p,x}) \rightarrow p)\) from which it follows that \((p) \rightarrow (3x(\phi_{p,x}) \& \neg p)\).

The argument is not quite finished yet. Since the content distinction is modal, its denial should also be. The modality is epistemic: for all the sceptic knows, it is possible that reality is other than it appears. Since the respective derivations from (i) and (ii) take the form of proofs of \((x)(p) \rightarrow (\phi_{p,x} \& \neg p)\) (for the Platonic Protagorean) and \((p) \rightarrow (3x(\phi_{p,x}) \& \neg p)\) (for the Paraconsistent Protagorean), they may be understood as having the form “it is known that \((x)(p) \rightarrow (\phi_{p,x} \& \neg p)\)” and “it is known that \((p) \rightarrow (3x(\phi_{p,x}) \& \neg p)\)” respectively. But, in general, if it is known that not-A, then A is epistemically impossible. Thus each constitutes a denial of the epistemic possibility that reality is other than it appears in the form appropriate for the Protagorean in question.

Now consider Sextus. Suppose that \( p \) appears to be the case to \( a \) and that \( \neg p \) appears to be the case to \( b \). The Pyrrhonian does not propose to adjudicate such a conflict of appearances, for he finds that no attempt at adjudication is decisive. But nor does he propose to accept both conflicting appearances as true, relatively or not. Rather he suspends judgement, and, since suspension of judgement is consistent with his continuing to inquire, in doing so, he leaves it an open question which of \( p \) and \( \neg p \) is in fact the case. As the Protagorean’s acceptance of conflict stems from his denial of the content distinction, conversely, it is Sextus’ refusal simply to accept both of a pair of conflicting appearances that implies a commitment to the content distinction, to the possibility that reality may be other than it appears.

Two questions remain, and they are both substantial. If we now have a grip on the kind of appearance-reality contrast the sceptical pattern relies on, can the sceptic be said to be committed to it? And is it a commitment which can be dislodged by sceptical means? The second question needs an answer, however, one answers the first. Even if the sceptic can distance himself from commitment to the content distinction, there are plenty of dogmatists around prepared to deny it.
Can the Sceptic Avoid the Commitment?

If one seeks to deny that the sceptic is himself committed to a content distinction between appearance and reality, two approaches seem likely. The first focuses on the modality of the alleged commitment. We have suggested that the sceptic's procedure depends on the supposition that it is possible that reality is other than it appears to be. But this possibility is entirely consistent with the thought that it is also possible that reality is indeed as it appears to be. So one might think that this is not a commitment to be worried about. The sceptic is simply hedging his bets in an eminently sceptical fashion.

The modality may indeed complicate matters. However, it is the modal claim itself which the Protagorean denies, and so, by contrast, which the Pyrrhonist assumes. The modal claim itself is what is up for dispute. At issue is not whether or not reality is other than it appears, but whether or not it is possible that reality is other than it appears. The point of the contrast with Protagoras is to bring into focus the possibility on which the sceptic's procedure depends by generating a stand off: a denial of that very possibility. Protagoras' position rules out the possibility that reality is other than it appears. In the long run, as we shall see, Protagoras' denial may help the sceptic divest himself of his commitment, since it allows the sceptic to generate conflicting views about the content distinction itself. In the short term, however, the contrast with Protagoras reveals that, even granted the modality, the sceptic's procedure relies on a contentious view of the relation between appearance and reality, commitment to which would be commitment to a philosophical position. So, the commitment, if such it be, does matter, and matters no matter where one stands on the dispute about the scope of the Pyrrhonist’s scepticism.\(^{14}\)

The second approach to absolving the sceptic of a commitment to the content distinction is to construe it dialectically. Frede argues that what he calls the 'global contrast between appearance and reality'\(^{15}\) is a dogmatic assumption exploited dialectically by the sceptic, not something the sceptic is committed to in propria persona. But Frede's contrast is between a dogmatist who believes that 'in reality, things are quite different from the way they seem to be' and the sceptic for whom 'nothing rules out the possibility that, in reality, things should

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14 In fact it is not clear whether the debate about the scope of scepticism even applies to claims of this sort, being focused on the status of what we might call first-order claims about particular aspects of reality: is this wine sweet? do things move? The content distinction might be thought of as a second-order claim. However, Sextus' arguments about the nature of truth, the criterion and proof, in M VII and VIII, show that the same PH procedure – and the same anti-dogmatism – still applies.

be exactly as they appear to be'. The commitment we are canvassing does not rule out this possibility. But, again, in contrast to Protagoras, it does seem to require that it is only a possibility; it could be false.

Another version of the dialectical approach might be derived from Annas and Barnes; they argue that, in general, the sceptic need not himself believe the premisses of his arguments, but requires only that his opponents do so. His arguments are essentially *ad hominem* in character. While, in general, this seems right, it is not clear how easily it can be made to work for the specific case in question. It is the medical character of Pyrrhonism which shapes Annas' and Barnes' position. The Pyrrhonists argue from their opponents’ premisses, because it is their opponents’ dogmatism they seek to cure. If, Annas and Barnes suggest, we reject the Pyrrhonist’s premisses, it is because we are not in need of them: ‘if we do really reject all of the Pyrrhonist’s premisses, then, the Pyrrhonist will argue, we are already Pyrrhonists ourselves.’ But consider, again, the contrast with the Protagorean. In the case of equally balanced conflicting appearances, where the sceptic proposes suspension of judgement, the Protagorean instead accepts both conflicting appearances. The Protagorean does not accept the premiss on which the transition to suspension of judgement depends; but he is not therefore a Pyrrhonist himself. The Protagorean has a genuine alternative to the Pyrrhonist’s procedure. And it is this alternative which suggests, by contrast, the Pyrrhonist’s own commitment.

Unless a dialectical approach can indeed be applied to the content distinction we have identified, the sceptic must look to himself to rid himself of this commitment. And it is far from clear that such a dialectical approach will work. Even if a dialectical approach can be so applied, the sceptic must have something to offer the dogmatist whose commitment it is. Either way, the question remains whether this is a commitment which can be dislodged in the way the sceptic advertises as the way to get rid of dogmatic commitments. In other words, can the sceptical journey described in PH I be followed when the question under dispute is whether or not there is a content distinction between appearance and reality?

**Can the Sceptic Dislodge the Commitment?**

Recall the sceptical journey: from conflicting appearances (via undecidability) to the equal weight of the conflicting appearances; from the equal weight of the

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16 Frede (1979) = (1987) p. 191 (our emphasis). The reader may note that we have quoted from two different papers by Frede, although the argumentative point depends solely on the references to Frede's (1979) paper (= pp. 179–200 in his (1987)).

17 Annas and Barnes (1985) pp. 44–46. The point is made, at least initially, in order to show that the sceptic need not be committed in *propria persona* to any of the individual arguments deployed in the operation of the Modes. But the point is made quite generally and might be supposed to apply to the premisses to the sceptical journey as a whole. Cf. Hankinson (1995) p. 192.

appearances (via the content distinction) to suspension of judgement. If we get this far, tranquillity follows.

It is easy enough to identify a conflict of appearances on the question of the possibility of slippage between the way things appear and the way they are in reality. A difference of opinion can be identified among the dogmatists themselves. Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics (to name but a few) could all be said to hold that reality may indeed be other than it appears. (There would, of course, be differences in more finely tuned statements of their views.) Protagoras holds a view which rules out the possibility that reality is other than it appears. 19

The sceptic’s journey can begin, therefore, with these conflicting opinions. But can it get any further? Circularity threatens. Suppose the sceptic reflects on the conflict of opinion between Plato (say) and Protagoras. Faced with these conflicting opinions, the sceptic’s usual strategy is to offer reasons to suppose that neither opinion can be preferred over the other; that the truth of the matter cannot be decided. Following this strategy, the sceptic is led directly to suspension of judgement. However, in this case, the matter under dispute directly relates to the cogency of this very strategy.

The dispute between Plato and Protagoras is a dispute as to whether there is anything to decide that their different impressions do not in themselves settle. Protagoras maintains that there is not. His view – that it is impossible that reality is other than it appears – is, as we have seen, accepting of conflict. Thus, in the face of conflicting appearances, the Protagorean simply accepts both. Of course, the sceptic is not himself committed to Protagoras’ position. He purports simply to be inquiring, quite open-endedly, into the matter on which Plato and Protagoras disagree. So the sceptic need not agree with Protagoras’ assessment, and need not follow the Protagorean’s procedure. The threat of circularity, however, is that in moving from the disagreement between Plato and Protagoras to suspension of judgement, the sceptic seems to need to disagree with Protagoras and side with Plato. By not accepting both conflicting appearances, he leaves the matter an open question. But this implies, as Protagoras’ view would not, that the conflict cannot be accepted, but must be resolved; that there is a question yet to be decided, a question as to which of Plato’s and Protagoras’ views corresponds to how things are. And leaving this question open appears simply to reimport the content distinction, as it were, by the back door. The sceptic’s own procedure thus appears to take a side in this particular dispute.

If the circularity charge sticks, the sceptic is in trouble. If the sceptic is himself committed to the content distinction he now has a philosophical commitment

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19 For the specific case of perceptual appearances, so do the Epicureans, who hold that all perceptions are true. In M VII.388 Sextus refers to one Xenides of Corinth who declared that all appearances are false. This view would make it a necessity that reality is other than it appears. The Protagorean challenges the legitimacy of the sceptic’s transition from the equal weight of conflicting appearances to suspension of judgement by offering as an alternative that one accept both conflicting appearances. Xenides’ position would replace suspension of judgement with the rejection of both.

20 Dummett, in The Justification of Deducibility, describes a circularity involving the employment of the validity of this form of inference, while failing to accept such a form of inference, might nonetheless be an argument. This might suggest that the content of Protagoras than in an open-ended inquiry precisely does not end up providing the cause of the disease (PH I.26.4) to a ladder which can be thrown away.

Faced with these difficulties, surely the sceptic must try to tame his journey. On the basis of his intentions...

21 Would the ‘proof against proof’ provide a paralogism self-refutation in the proof against itself? Hence, it is proof against proof, at least, is what is suggested by the careful suspension of judgement and the content distinction procedure before it reaches its goal.
to suspension of judgement. If we get stuck up on the prospect of appearances on the question of how things appear and the way they can be identified among the dogmatists (to name but a few) could all be said than it appears. (There would, of course, elements of their views.) Protagoras holds reality is other than it appears.19
Before, with these conflicting opinions. (Suppose the skeptic reflects on an issue and) and Protagoras. Faced with these strategies is to offer reasons to suppose over the other; that the truth of the strategy, the skeptic is led directly in this case, the matter under dispute the strategy.
Protagoras is a dispute as to whether there is impressions do not in themselves settle. His view – that it is impossible that we have seen, accepting of conflict. Hence, the Protagorean simply accepts self-committed to Protagoras’ position, quite open-endedly, into the matter of how things appear. So the skeptic need not agree with how the Protagorean’s procedure. The moving from the disagreement between argument, the skeptic seems to need to Plato. By not accepting both conflicting an open question. But this implies, as conflict cannot be accepted, but must be decided, a question as to which of us to how things are. And leaving this apart the content distinction, as it were, procedure thus appears to take a side in

This is in trouble. If the skeptic is himself so do the Epicureans, who hold that all person, Xenides of Corinth who declared that all necessity that reality is other than it appears. The skeptic’s transition from the equal weight of argument by offering as an alternative that one accept would replace suspension of judgement with

on which his whole procedure is based which cannot itself be neutralised by sceptical practice. The dialectical position is not much better. Since the skeptic’s procedure trades on the content distinction, a dogmatist like Plato, who subscribes to the distinction, might be induced to scepticism in other fields, but only by relying on one of his own dogmatic commitments and one the skeptic cannot obviously cure. And a dogmatist like Protagoras could not be cured at all. The skeptic has no universal panacea.

But the skeptic need not give up yet, as it is not at all clear that the circularity charge can be made to stick. The circularity charge is a weapon in the skeptic’s own argumentation, Agrippan mode 5. Sextus explains this mode as occurring when

what ought to be confirmatory of the object of investigation has need of warrant from the object of investigation. (PH I.169)

Circularity here refers to circularity in arguments, with premises and a conclusion. The problem with making the circularity charge stick against the skeptic is that it is not at all obvious that the skeptic has provided us with an argument as such. The skeptic uses arguments: lots of them. But the skeptic’s journey looks more like a procedure than an argument or proof. Suspension of judgement is something the skeptic does; it is not the conclusion of an argument. But it is, of course, something he does as a result of reflecting on arguments, the supposedly equally balanced arguments pro and con.

If, as appears to be the case, the arguments under consideration disagree as to the appropriateness of suspending judgement as the next procedural step, can the skeptic suspend judgement without thereby taking sides? And is it problematically circular for the skeptic to operate a procedure which trades on a distinction the procedure is in this case intended to dislodge? The answers to these questions are unclear.20 After all, it is Sextus himself who compares sceptical expressions to medical purges, which eliminate themselves along with the cause of the disease (PH I.206), and the skeptic’s arguments against proof to a ladder which can be thrown away once climbed (M VIII.481).21

Faced with these difficulties, suppose we allow the skeptic to proceed on his journey. On the basis of his inability to decide between the views of Plato

20 Dummett, in 'The Justification of Deduction', reprinted in his (1978) pp. 290–318, suggests that a circularity involving the employment of a form of inference in the course of a proof of the validity of this form of inference, while fatal in the context of an attempt to persuade someone to accept such a form of inference, might nonetheless be legitimate in the context of an explanatory argument. This might suggest that the circularity matters more in a dialectical encounter with Protagoras than in an open-ended inquiry on the skeptic’s own behalf. But, of course, the skeptic precisely does not want to end up proving anything, nor even to explain anything, at least in the sense Dummett intends, so the situation is not entirely analogous to the one which he discusses.

21 Would the ‘proof against proof’ provide an analogous case? The point of the cheerfully acknowledged self-refutation in the proof against proof is that it must already be a proof, if it demolishes itself. Hence, it is proof against proof, and demolishes itself, as it were, in retrospect. This, at least, is what is suggested by the careful analysis of McPherran (1987). In the case of suspension of judgement and the content distinction, the circularity threatens to block the operation of the procedure before it reaches its goal.
and Protagoras, we allow him to suspend judgement about whether or not it is possible for reality to be other than it appears. Where does he end up?

At first, it might look as though the sceptic has now discovered a short cut to global suspension of judgement, and thus, according to him, to peace of mind. If the sceptic has suspended judgement on the question of whether or not it is possible for reality to be other than it appears, then, for every case of conflicting appearances, he has suspended judgement on whether there is anything more to do, any question to be decided. Here, truly, we seem to have the ladder which, once climbed, can be thrown away.

But is that what the sceptic wants? The sceptic’s procedural ladder is presented as a resource to be drawn on in the practice of a way of life. Sure, you may jettison the ladder after each climb. But you keep it somewhere handy ready for the next occasion. That is surely the implication of advertising a general operational procedure: of giving a sceptical method. Recall what we said at the start about the nature of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* as a work; it is a sales pitch, advertising the sceptical way of living a life. Running the procedure for the content distinction seems to strike at the heart of the sceptical method itself and reduce the sceptic to a state of suspended animation.

The notion of suspended animation needs clarification. What the Pyrrhonist is now taken to have suspended judgement upon is the question of whether or not it is possible that reality is other than it appears. How should we understand his position? The situation is complicated, once again, by the way in which Protagoras’ position leads to an acceptance of conflict. Since, on Protagoras’ view, it is impossible that reality is other than it appears, both of a pair of conflicting appearances must be accepted. The Pyrrhonist, in suspending judgement on the debate between Plato and Protagoras, need not himself accept both conflicting appearances. But, if he is truly to suspend judgement on the question, he must not reject this option either. What he must say to himself, then, is something like this: perhaps I should accept both of Plato’s and Protagoras’ impressions, and perhaps I should accept only one, but I do not know which to do. This is crucially different from a simple failure to decide between the conflicting appearances with which the sceptic is faced. This is a failure to decide whether or not there is in fact anything to decide. It is this latter condition that blocks any further application of the sceptical pattern involving suspension of judgement, which is a simple failure to decide. And it is this that leads us to describe this condition as one of suspended animation.

The charges of circularity and of suspended animation are different, but complement each other. The circularity charge suggests that the sceptic cannot in fact suspend judgement on this issue, because the act of doing so itself involves taking sides. The suspended animation charge suggests that, if the sceptic can truly suspend judgement in such a way as not to take sides, he thereby puts himself permanently at one remove from any decision-making process.

The charge here is not the traditional one, already levelled in antiquity, that the sceptic’s purported way of life cannot be lived. Rather the thought is that, if the sceptic can indeed achieve such a state, not it is possible for reality to be of himself out of the inquiry business. But it is just this joining the mark of their identity within the sceptic, that they are Pyrrhonists no longer, on this account.

There is a curious symmetry here. Protagorean: that his position demolishes VII.393). Appeals to Sextus’ criticism of self-refutation, M VII.389–90) for procedure. But the tenability of Pyrrhonian alternative not as something with which to contrast scepticism, Clarendon, Oxford, pp. 20–53.


S. Everson (1991): The Objective Appar- fall.

22 The turning point in this paper’s develop- seven years later – to some of the astute presentation of this paper’s ancestor to the special thanks. An earlier version of this paper, KCL. Her thanks, in addition, are due to Sylvia Berryman, M.M. McCabe, David Hume, as well as to Stephen Blancey for helpful dis-
judgement about whether or not it is years. Where does he end up?

 sceptic has now discovered a short cut thus, according to him, to peace of establishment on the question of whether or than it appears, then, for every case is ended judgement on whether there is decided. Here, truly, we seem to have swung away.

 sceptic’s procedural ladder is presentation as a way of life. Sure, you may keep it somewhere handily ready the implication of advertising a general methodical recall what we said at of Pyrrhonism as a work; it is a sales a life. Running the procedure for the heart of the sceptical method itself ends animation.

 needs clarification. What the Pyrrhonist upon is the question of whether or not it appears. How should we understand, once again, by the way in acceptance of conflict. Since, on Protagoras is other than it appears, both of a accepted. The Pyrrhonist, in suspending, Protagoras, need not himself of if he is truly suspend judgement on option either. What he must say to me perhaps I should accept both of Plato’s is I should accept only one, but I do different from a simple failure to decide on which the sceptic is faced. This is in fact anything to decide. It is other application of the sceptical pattern which is a simple failure to decide. this condition as one of suspended

suspended animation are different, but charge suggests that the sceptic cannot because the act of doing so itself sation charge suggests that, if the remove from any decision-making it already levelled in antiquity, that be lived. Rather the thought is that, if the sceptic can indeed achieve suspension of judgement about whether or not it is possible for reality to be other than it appears, he has thereby taken himself out of the inquiry business. The challenge is to the sceptic’s joint claim both to be a perpetual inquirer and to have (at the very least) no philosophical commitments. But it is just this joint claim that the Pyrrhonists have given as the mark of their identity within the Hellenistic philosophical arena. Without it, they are Pyrrhonists no longer, on their own understanding.

There is a curious symmetry here with Sextus’ own charge against the Protagorean: that his position demolishes the very possibility of inquiry (e.g. M VII.393). Appeals to Sextus’ criticisms of Protagoras (including the charge of self-refutation, M VII.389–90) might seem the obvious objection to our procedure. But the tenability of Protagoras’ position – and its dogmatism, at least from the sceptic’s point of view – are not to the point here. We use the Protagorean alternative not as something to replace scepticism, but as something with which to contrast scepticism, in order to reveal the implications of the Pyrrhonist’s own procedure. And if the Pyrrhonist seeks to divest himself of these implications, the Pyrrhonist too turns out to have an insecure position within the inquiry business.22

References


22 The turning point in this paper’s development came when we felt we had answers – some seven years later – to some of the astute questions posed by Myles Burnyeat following our joint presentation of this paper’s ancestor to his graduate seminar (Cambridge, 1991); we owe him special thanks. An earlier version of this paper was read by VH to the Philosophy Department in KCL. Her thanks, in addition, are due to those colleagues present on that occasion, in particular to Sylvia Berryman, M.M. McCabe, David Papineau, Mark Sainsbury and Richard Sorabji, as well as to Stephen Blamey for helpful discussion.
Das Problem der Möglichkeit einen Böse festzustellen, dessen Grunddogma die Annahme von einem guten ontologischen Grundsatz für alles Gute und das Auftreten von Bösem hier nicht, sondern augenscheinlich keine andere Ursache haben kann, als das Gute als Ursache des Bösen reduziert zu werden. 

Daß das Gute aber irgendwie bestimmt ist, merkt er (Enn. I.8[51], 2,25f, II.9[33], 13,27ff) 

Plotin selbst hat das Böse keineswegs. 

I.8.6 wiederholt in Anschluß an Platon (II.10, 6, 21) als das am vollkommenen, abstrichlosen. Als das Böse hat er es dabei als das Maximum seiner Position, also ontologisch und unabhängig von der Gleichung von I.8.3,35ff; 5,8f; 12,5; 13,9, etc., in dieser Hinsicht der Unabhängigkeit. Bei ihm dann auch als das „Nichts“ (I.8.13, 2, 22). 

III.6[26], 7,1–19, II.5[25], 4–5, I.8.6 (beide Bestimmungen sicherlich in μὴ ὁν ἐν τῶν Sophistes). 

In einem neueren Aufsatz hat O’Meara, Das Böse bei Plotin, in seiner Kritik des Hauptgesetzes der Wesencharakteristik. 

1 Diese wird hier, ähnlich wie bei Aristoteles, Daß Sein in vollem Maße (οὐκ ἐκ τῶν ὄν, χωρίς, ὁπως) eingeführt, kann auch als einen rein ontologischen Anlaß geben. 

2 Ich füge hier der Vorsicht halber ein „ohne“ vor Interpretationsfehlern in die Literatur diskutiert zu sein. 

3 Vorteile der Terminologie in der mögliche Unterscheidung der beiden in der folgenden Argumentationsgang beitragen.