

# The Pyrrhonian Argument from Possible Disagreement

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*Abstract:* In his *Pyrrhonian Outlines*, Sextus Empiricus employs an argument based upon the possibility of disagreement in order to show that one should not assent to a Dogmatic claim to which at present one cannot oppose a rival claim. The use of this argument seems to be at variance with the Pyrrhonian stance, both because it does not seem to accord with the definition of Skepticism and because the argument appears to entail that the search for truth is doomed to failure. In the present paper, I examine the passages in which Sextus utilizes the argument from possible disagreement and offer an interpretation that makes the use of this argument compatible with the Pyrrhonian outlook.

## I

In the Πυρρώνειοι Ὑποτυπώσεις (*PH*), Sextus Empiricus makes use of an argument based upon the possibility of disagreement to induce suspension of judgment (ἐποχή). The purpose of the present article is to determine whether the use of this argument runs counter to the very definition of Skepticism and the alleged open-mindedness of this philosophical stance. It is my contention that Sextus' recourse to possible disagreements to induce ἐποχή is not necessarily incompatible with his account of Pyrrhonism.<sup>1</sup> To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study devoted to exploring in detail an argument whose use by Sextus has been regarded as posing insurmountable problems.

I will begin by briefly discussing the so-called Five Modes of Agrippa, the reason being twofold. First, the mode from disagreement is among these five modes and the argument from possible disagreement can be regarded as a version of it. Second, examining the scope of the Agrippan modes and the Pyrrhonist's attitude towards them will make it possible to understand one of the problems that the use of the argument in question seems to pose. Next, I will explore the passages from *PH* which expound the argument from possible disagreement in order to determine both whether they reveal

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<sup>1</sup> I will employ 'Pyrrhonism' and 'Skepticism' as well as 'Pyrrhonist' and 'Skeptic' interchangeably.

that the Pyrrhonist believes that no disagreement can ever be settled and no truth can ever be found, and whether the use of that argument runs counter to Sextus' definition of Skepticism.

## II

The Five Modes are one of the sets of arguments by means of which the Skeptic expects to induce suspension of judgment. These modes, which are attributed to Agrippa by Diogenes Laertius (DL IX 88), are disagreement, infinite regress, relativity, hypothesis, and reciprocity.<sup>2</sup> Sextus presents them thus:

The mode deriving from disagreement [δισφωνίας] is that by means of which we discover that, with regard to the matter proposed, there has arisen, both in ordinary life and among philosophers, an undecidable dispute [ἀνεπίκριτον στάσις] owing to which we end up in suspension of judgment, since we are not able to choose or to reject anything. The mode deriving from regress *ad infinitum* is that in which we say that what is offered as a proof [πίστις] for the matter proposed needs another proof, and this latter needs another, and so on *ad infinitum*, so that, given that we have no starting point for establishing anything, suspension of judgment follows. The mode deriving from relativity, as we have said before, is that in which the underlying object appears thus and so relative to what does the judging and to the things observed together with it, but we suspend judgment about what it is like in relation to nature. The mode deriving from hypothesis is that which arises whenever the Dogmatists, being thrown back *ad infinitum*, start from something which they do not establish, but which they deem worthy to assume simply and without proof by virtue of a concession. The reciprocal mode arises whenever that which ought to be confirmatory of the matter investigated needs a proof from what is investigated. In this case, as we are not able to take either to establish the other, we suspend judgment about both. (PH I 165–169; cf. DL IX 88f.)<sup>3</sup>

These modes constitute a sophisticated battery of arguments which even to this day continue to be the object of much discussion among epistemologists, who have particularly focused on the modes of reciprocity, infinite regress, and hypothesis – the famous 'Agrippa's trilemma'.<sup>4</sup> The seriousness of the epistemological problem posed by these arguments lies in the fact that no claim seems to be able to survive their combined attack, for the justification of any claim leads to an infinite regress of reasons, or falls into circular reasoning, or rests on an unjustified bare assertion. Applied to any

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed examination of the modes of disagreement, infinite regress, reciprocity, and hypothesis, see Barnes 1990. For a general presentation of the Five Modes, see Hankinson 1998, 182–192, and Thorsrud 2009, 147–170.

<sup>3</sup> Translations of the passages from Sextus' works are my own, although I have consulted Annas and Barnes 2000; Bury 1933–1949; and Mates 1996.

<sup>4</sup> For contemporary discussions of the Agrippan modes, see Fogelin 1994; Sosa 1997; Williams 2004; Klein 2008; and Lammenranta 2008.

given disagreement among rival claims, this means that the dispute will never be settled, since it is impossible to prove that one of the competing claims is rationally justified or, at least, more plausible than the others. Now, although the Five Modes are constantly employed in the Sextan corpus, it must be borne in mind that the Pyrrhonist is not committed to the principles of rational justification at work in the modes of reciprocity, infinite regress, and hypothesis, but merely makes an *ad hominem* use of them: it is his Dogmatic opponents who endorse such principles for conducting their reasoning and grounding their doctrines.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore they who must accept the unwelcome conclusion that no claim is ever justified. As a proto-Skeptic, the Pyrrhonist did endorse the view that the justification of a given claim cannot lead to an infinite regress of reasons, or involve circular reasoning, or rest on an arbitrary assumption, but once he became a full-blown Skeptic that endorsement was replaced by suspension of judgment (cf. *PH I* 26, 29).

Now, the Pyrrhonist's lack of commitment to the canons of rational justification at work in the Agrippan modes does not preclude him from using them in his own philosophical investigations. For all he knows, these modes may be the right touchstone for testing the various competing claims, arguments, and theories which are the object of his investigations. As already noted, the problem is that the requirements underpinning the modes of infinite regress, reciprocity, and hypothesis seem to be impossible to meet, since no belief appears to be self-evident or immediately justified, i.e., to enjoy a non-inferential warrant. However, the Pyrrhonist, in keeping with his agnostic skepticism, does not rule out either the possibility of eventually finding a belief that enjoys non-inferential justification or the possibility of realizing that one or more of the beliefs he has already examined actually enjoy(s) non-inferential justification.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, neither does he exclude the possibility of eventually discovering that the principles of rational justification at work in the Agrippan modes are self-evident. This interpretation is in accord with the attitude which, according to Sextus, distinguishes the Pyrrhonian philosophy from the others: whereas the Dogmatists in the proper sense of the term claim to have discovered the truth in philosophical investigations and some of the Academics assert that it cannot be apprehended, the Pyrrhonists continue their investigation (*PH I* 2f.). Hence, if the Pyrrhonists ruled out the above-mentioned possibilities, their continu-

<sup>5</sup> See Williams 1988; Fogelin 1994, 115f.; Hankinson 1998, 192; Bailey 2002, 259–262; and Striker 2004, 16.

<sup>6</sup> Pace Palmer 2000, 356f., 359, 364f., 373; Striker 2001, 120–122, 127; and Bailey 2002, 9, 16, 256, 261, 265. Palmer's view is to be explained by his overlooking of the fact that the Pyrrhonist is not committed to the modes of suspension of judgment (both the Ten and the Five), but merely makes a dialectical use of them. The case of Striker and Bailey is more difficult to account for because they are aware of that use.

ing inquiry (ζήτησις) would make no sense and they would be adopting a stance similar to that which Sextus ascribes to certain Academics.<sup>7</sup>

The interpretation under consideration is also in perfect agreement with a number of passages that bear on the Five Modes. At *PH* III 70, Sextus indicates that the disagreement about what is up to us has remained unresolvable or undecidable (ἀνεπίκριτος) because up to now (ἄχρι νῦν) we have not found a criterion of truth. Also, in his discussion of the sign, he remarks that “up to the present [μέχρι δεῦρο] its nature varies, some supposing that it is perceptible, others intelligible”, and that “this controversy [διάστασις] remains unresolvable almost forever [σχεδόν ... δι’ αἰῶνος]. Given that it remains unresolvable, it is also absolutely necessary that the sign be kept in suspension of judgment” (*Adversus Dogmaticos* [*AD*] II 177). Note how Sextus cautiously qualifies the phrase δι’ αἰῶνος by using the adverb σχεδόν, thus being consistent with his remark that the nature of the sign is up to now a matter of controversy. Likewise, at *AD* II 257 he observes that, since there has so far (μέχρι τοῦ νῦν) been an unresolvable disagreement about whether the sign is perceptible or intelligible, one must say that the sign is still (ἄκμῆν) non-evident. These and other similar passages found in the Sextan corpus<sup>8</sup> are relevant for defining the scope of the Agrippan modes because they talk about unresolvable disagreements or controversies, which can be taken as a straightforward reference to the mode from disagreement, and because it is the modes of infinite regress, reciprocity, and hypothesis which ultimately block the various attempts at resolving any given dispute among competing positions (*PH* I 170–177). This is why the passages under consideration make it clear that the Skeptic does not think that the Agrippan modes show that the disagreements he has investigated are undecidable or unresolvable once and for all, but only that they have been so up until now.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Given that I do not think that the Skeptic rules out, on the basis of the Five Modes, the eventual discovery of the truth on a given matter, I do not think that what he is looking for cannot be the truth (*pace* Palmer 2000) or that he is disingenuous in stating he is searching for truth (*pace* Striker 2001). On the complex issue of the Pyrrhonist’s ongoing investigation, see Palmer 2000; Striker 2001; Grgić 2006; Perin 2006; Barnes 2007; Thorsrud 2009, 131, 135f., 161; Marchand 2010; and Vogt 2011. In Machuca 2011, section 3, I give an overview of the scholarly discussion of this issue and advance my own view.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., *AD* II 401, 427f., V 229, 330.

<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that the Pyrrhonist’s ἀνεπίκριτος διαφωνία is not a disagreement which is unresolvable or undecidable in itself or once and for all, I still prefer to translate ἀνεπίκριτος as ‘unresolvable’ or ‘undecidable’ instead of ‘unresolved’ or ‘undecided’ (cf. Barnes 1990, 18f.). The reason is that, if up till now the different sides of a disagreement have appeared to a person to have equal force, this person may correctly say that at least thus far it has not been *possible* for him to give his assent to any of the positions in conflict. In this regard, note that, at *PH* I 165, Sextus remarks that the reason we end up suspending judgment when confronted with an ἀνεπίκριτος στάσις is that “we are not able [οὐ δυνάμενοι] to choose or to reject anything”.

There is, however, a group of passages that appear to indicate that the Skeptic thinks that the unresolvable disagreements he has so far investigated will never cease. To begin with, when discussing the criterion ‘by which’, Sextus tells us that, given that the Dogmatists will disagree about which person we should attend to “as long as water flows and tall trees grow”<sup>10</sup>, they cannot urge us to give our assent to anyone (*PH* II 37). The same line quoted here is used in two other passages. In the first, which forms part of the discussion of the sign, Sextus points out that the reality of perceptible objects is not agreed upon and that, “as long as water runs<sup>11</sup> and tall trees grow, the physicists will never (οὔποτε) stop warring with one another about it” (*AD* II 184). In the second passage, found in the first book of the *Adversus Mathematicos* (*AM*), Sextus indicates that the existence of the incorporeal is a matter of investigation among the Dogmatists and that it will be so “as long as water flows and tall trees grow” (*AM* I 28). And he adds that “it is absurd to say that things which still remain disputed and the matter of uncertain dissensions are taught, as though they were agreed upon and concurred with” (*AM* I 28). What should be inferred from these passages? In the first place, the epigram “as long as water flows/runs and tall trees grow” has a sense of eternity. This is confirmed by the fact that *AD* II 184 tells us that the dispute among the physicists will never end. The Skeptic thus seems to believe that the disagreements referred to in the passages under consideration will never cease. Although these passages do not explicitly talk about the unresolvability of those disagreements, their contexts make it plain that Sextus is discussing disputes he is not able to resolve, since this is precisely the reason he cannot take anyone as a criterion or affirm the existence of the sign or say that the incorporeal is teachable. He therefore seems to be affirming that the disputes he has inspected are eternally undecidable and, hence, that the search for truth is forever doomed to failure. And this is a more serious problem for the consistency of his Pyrrhonism, since although the claim that there will always be disagreements is imprudent for a Pyrrhonist to make, the claim that they will never be susceptible of resolution commits him to negative Dogmatism. It is my contention, however, that we should not make a big deal out of the passages examined, for the following reasons. First, we saw that in a number of texts there are explicit temporal qualifications with which Sextus intends to make it clear that the Skeptic does not assert that the disagreements he has examined are forever unresolvable. Second, I think that Sextus’ intention in using the anonymous epigram is only to emphasize the pervasive disagreements that exist among the Dogmatists. He should be understood as merely making the empirical claim that the Dogmatists quarrel about every possible

<sup>10</sup> This line forms part of an epigram which was placed upon the tomb of Midas and which was attributed to Cleobulos of Lindus (see *Phaedrus* 464c–d and *DL* I 89f.).

<sup>11</sup> Here Sextus utilizes ῥέη instead of νόη.

topic of philosophical investigation over and over again, including what epistemic criterion should be used to resolve first-order disagreements. Third, even after quoting the epigram at *AM* I 28 Sextus talks about things that are *still* contentious, which is in perfect accord with the cautious attitude he explicitly adopts most of the time. Finally, as regards the remark that the physicists will never stop quarrelling, I believe it is a careless way of stressing the fact that the Dogmatists have always been engaged in long-running disputes.

Before moving on, I would like to address an objection that has been raised to my previous account, namely, that by talking about both the *ad hominem* use of the Agrippan modes and their employment in the Skeptic's own investigation, I underestimate the extent to which these modes (and the modes in general) are presented as a device for the attainment and maintenance of ἐποχή. In so doing, I focus on the picture of the Skeptic as an inquirer and not as a determined seeker of ἐποχή. Now, I think that the activity of ζήτησις is not incompatible with the fact that the Skeptic seeks to maintain the state of ἐποχή as a way of avoiding rash assent to a thesis which does not seem to be epistemically justified. His ongoing investigation is possible because of his suspending judgment about both the existence and the knowability of truth and is required by the open-mindedness resulting from his ἐποχή. The Skeptic undertakes new inquiries employing the modes and other argumentative maneuvers in order to see whether he encounters a position which is epistemically preferable to its rivals or whether he is rather forced to maintain his ἐποχή because the competing positions strike him as having equal persuasive force. The Skeptic seeks for ἐποχή understood as the avoidance of Dogmatic rashness which makes one assent to a thesis whose grounds and implications one has not carefully and thoroughly investigated.<sup>12</sup>

### III

In the previous section, I analyzed some texts from the Sextan corpus which show that the use of the Agrippan modes, and in particular the mode from disagreement, is compatible with the Skeptic's cautious and open-minded attitude. I also explained away a small group of passages that may support a different, Dogmatic interpretation of the Skeptic's use of those modes. Now, there is a second group of passages which pose a more serious problem, since they present an argument based upon the possibility of disagreement which can be taken as a version of the mode from disagreement and which

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<sup>12</sup> The reason I do not here mention ἀταραξία in matters of opinion is that, contrary to most interpreters, I do not think that the search for and attainment of this state of mind is essential to Pyrrhonism. On this, see Machuca 2006.

seems to block any possibility of ever discovering the truth or of ever resolving current disagreements. In addition, the use of that argument seems to be at variance with the very definition of Skepticism. I will examine in detail the passages that expound the argument from possible disagreement because this will allow us to appreciate the differences and similarities between its various forms. In addition, so far no study has offered a thorough and systematic analysis of all the relevant texts, which is a necessary condition for determining whether the two problems at hand are insurmountable.

The first of the passages in question is found in the chapter which presents the modes leading to ἐπιουχῆ (*PH I* 31–35). There Sextus points out that there are different kinds of oppositions, one of which is that between present things and past or future things. The example he gives of this type of opposition is the following:

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

According to this line of thought, although at the present time one cannot refute a given argument advanced by a Dogmatist, one should nonetheless remain cautious and refrain from assenting to it, given that one cannot rule out the possibility that, in the future, one might discover an opposite argument which will appear to be as sound or as epistemically persuasive as the argument that is currently under consideration. The disagreement between rival arguments is not actual but merely possible.<sup>13</sup>

The second passage forms part of the exposition of the Second Mode of Aenesidemus, i.e., that which derives from the differences among humans. At one point of his exposition, Sextus observes that we must believe either all humans or only some of them. The first alternative is ruled out because it implies believing opposing views, whereas the second leads us to suspension of judgment, given that there is an undecidable dispute about whom we should assent to (*PH I* 88). To the proposal that we should assent to the majority view, Sextus retorts by arguing that it is childish,

since no one is able to visit all humans and determine what pleases the majority, given that it is possible that among some nations of which we have no knowledge the things that are rare among us are usual for the majority, whereas the things which happen to most of us are there rare – as for instance, that most people when bitten by venomous spiders do not suffer whereas some rarely suffer. (*PH I* 89)

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<sup>13</sup> A reviewer has suggested to me that the argument under consideration relies on inductive inference in the sense of presupposing confidence in this kind of inference (cf. Flückiger 1990, 50; Striker 2001, 128; and Spinelli 2005, 52 n. 10). The problem with this interpretation is that Sextus explicitly attacks induction at *PH II* 204.



This passage differs from the previous one in that the argument from possible disagreement is used in the course of the discussion of an actual present dispute, i.e., the dispute about whom we should assent to. This disagreement cannot be resolved in part because in the future a disagreement might arise about what the majority's opinion is if we acquired knowledge of the practices of some currently unknown peoples. But the argumentative pattern is the same: the reason one should not at present assent to a given claim (in this case, the one expressing the opinion of the majority in our nation) is the possibility of a future disagreement. Also, unlike the previous passage, the present one does not refer to something which might happen in the future, namely, the proposal of new argument. Rather, it refers to something that may be happening right now, i.e., the existence of certain nations unknown to us where what is rare for us is common for them. But, once again, what matters is that the two texts refer to the mere possibility of disagreement. In the first passage, disagreement will arise if a future event occurs, whereas in the present one disagreement will arise if knowledge of a currently unknown fact is acquired.

In the third passage, Sextus points out that, even granting that humans are the criterion by which things must be judged, it will first be necessary to resolve the disagreement about which person should be taken as criterion. If the Dogmatists said that it is the Sage, one would then ask them which Sage, but they would not agree with one another on the answer (*PH II 37f.*). If they claimed that we should instead take as criterion the person who at present is the most clever of all, there would still be two problems: (i) they would disagree about who is more clever than the others, and (ii) even if they agreed with one another about who, among all people past and present, is the most clever, it would not be possible to take him as criterion (*PH II 39*). The reason for (ii) is that, given that there is an almost infinite variation in intelligence,

we declare that it is possible for someone else to be born who is more intelligent than the man whom we say is more intelligent than those of the past and the present. Hence, just as we are required to believe the one who, because of his intelligence, is now said to be wiser than those of the present and the past, so too it is necessary to believe the one who is more intelligent than him that will exist after him. And when that one is born, it is necessary to expect in turn that someone else more intelligent than him will be born, and someone else more intelligent than him, and so on *ad infinitum*. And it is non-evident whether they will agree with one another or will disagree in what they say. This is why, even if someone is acknowledged to be more intelligent than those of the past and the present, given that we cannot say affirmatively that no one will be more sagacious than him (for that is non-evident), it will always be necessary to wait for the judgment of the one who will later be more intelligent than him and never assent to the one who is presently superior. (*PH II 40f.*)

Like in the previous two passages, the argument expounded here rests on the possibility that a future disagreement might arise: as there might well be



in the future someone who will be more clever than the present most clever person and their judgments might not agree with one another, one should refrain from accepting what the present most clever person affirms to be the case. As in the argument expounded in the second passage, the reference to a possible disagreement is intended to block one of the attempts at resolving an actual disagreement, namely, the dispute over which person should be considered the criterion of truth.

The fourth passage is found in the third book of *PH*, in the course of the discussion of whether there is anything good or bad by nature. After referring to several disagreements among laws and customs, Sextus tells us that

even if, with regard to some cases, we cannot immediately state an anomaly, it must be said that it is possible that in some nations unknown to us there is disagreement also about them. Hence, just as, if we had not known, for example, about the Egyptians' custom of marrying their sisters, we would have wrongly affirmed that it is agreed by all that people must not marry their sisters, so likewise, with regard to those things in which no anomalies manifest themselves to us, it is not apposite to affirm that there is no disagreement about them, given that it is possible, as I said, that among some of the nations unknown to us there is disagreement about them. (*PH* III 233f.)

Like the second passage, the present one refers to something that may be happening right now, namely, the existence of nations unknown to us in which certain laws and customs are matters of controversy. The possible future knowledge of such nations would mean that the customs or laws we unanimously regard as morally correct would be a matter of dispute, which is why we should not accept those customs and laws as being correct. Once again, the disagreement is not actual, but possible.

Finally, in the Ninth Mode of Aenesidemus, which is that based on rare or frequent encounters, Sextus tells us:

Rare things too are thought to be valuable, but not at all the things familiar to us and easily gotten. For example, if we conceived of water as being rare, how much more valuable it would appear to us than all the things that are now thought to be valuable! Or if we imagined gold as simply scattered in quantities over the ground like stones, to whom would we suppose that it would then be valuable or worth hoarding? (*PH* I 143)<sup>14</sup>

This passage can be interpreted as referring to the possibility of disagreement, which is confirmed by the fact that the Aenesideman modes are designed to lay out different types of conflicts of perceptions and judgments. If, say, gold were a metal easily found in large amounts, then we would value it much less than we in fact do, which reveals a disagreement between our actual and counterfactual judgments about the true value of gold. Being unable to resolve this disagreement, we should suspend judgment about the real nature of gold. A difference between this passage and the previous ones is that, in the present case, the possibility cannot in principle become actual,

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<sup>14</sup> I thank Filip Grgić for calling my attention to this passage.

unless we proceed with Pyrrhonian caution and, suspending judgment about whether the laws of nature are contingent or necessary, we refrain from ruling out the possibility that gold might become easily available at some point in the future. In the case of water, by contrast, everyone would agree that the possibility that it might turn out to be extremely rare may well become actual.

Although Sextus does not explicitly say so in the quoted passages, the problem that possible disagreements give rise to is that, if they became actual, one would need to find effective ways of resolving them. And here the modes of infinite regress, reciprocity, and hypothesis would enter the scene to block such attempts at resolution. Now, the passages under consideration might be read as indicating that the Skeptic's intention is to show that we must suspend judgment about the nature of things once and for all because the search for truth is doomed to failure.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the argument based upon the possibility of disagreement seems to be a maneuver designed to block any attempt at gaining knowledge or forming rationally justified beliefs: even if there is no current disagreement about a given topic, we should nonetheless suspend judgment because a disagreement might arise – and it is not clear how we could settle it. This is plainly at variance with my previous interpretation of the scope of the Agrippan modes and with Sextus' claim that Skepticism differs from the other kinds of philosophy in that the Skeptic continues the investigation. I nonetheless think it is possible to explain away this apparent inconsistency. Bearing in mind the caveat at the very beginning of *PH*<sup>16</sup> and the account of the Skeptical  $\phi\omega\nu\alpha\iota$  (*PH* I 187–209), one may argue that in the five passages in question Sextus is merely reporting how things appear to him at the very moment in which he is discussing the matters addressed in those passages. Nothing he says rules out either the possibility that, at some point in the future, he might come to the conclusion that the argument from possible disagreement is unsound, or the possibility that, at some point in the future, that argument might not appear to him to be equal in force to the Dogmatic argument he will happen to be considering. The use of this argument would pose an insoluble problem for the coherence of Pyrrhonism only if the Skeptic were committed to its soundness. I believe he would restrict the scope of the argument based upon the possibility of disagreement by using expressions such as  $\mu\acute{\epsilon}\chi\rho\iota \nu\tilde{\upsilon}\nu$  or  $\acute{\alpha}\chi\rho\iota \nu\tilde{\upsilon}\nu$ : “Up to now the argument from possible disagreement has appeared to me to be equal in force to the Dogmatic argu-

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Hankinson 1998, 183; Palmer 2000, 355f.; Striker 2001, 127f.; and Marchand 2010, 134.

<sup>16</sup> At *PH* I 4, Sextus warns us that “we will give an outline of the Skeptical way of thought, with the caveat that we affirm of none of the things to be discussed that they certainly are just as we say they are, but rather we report descriptively on each thing according to how it appears to us now”.

ments to which I have opposed it". Note that the Skeptic may also be making a dialectical use of that argument, since one can reasonably hypothesize that certain Dogmatists employed some version of it, aware of how the discovery of other peoples' customs shook their commitment to theirs, or of how an argument they had advanced fully convinced of its soundness later met with a strong counter-argument. If my interpretation is correct, then the use of the argument from possible disagreement is not incompatible with the cautious and open-minded attitude that characterizes Pyrrhonian skepticism and that distinguishes it from the negative metadogmatism ascribed to most of the Academics at the very beginning of *PH*.

A second problem that the passages under discussion raise for the Skeptic is that they refer to merely possible disagreements which, as such, are not actual disagreements among apparently equipollent positions. For instance, even if the Skeptic cannot at present refute an argument propounded by one of his Dogmatic rivals, he still suspends his judgment because it is possible that in the future either someone will come up with an argument which appears as persuasive as the one he cannot refute at present, or he will discover an equally strong argument which has already been put forward but which he has not yet heard of. Therefore, when the Skeptic has recourse to the argument based upon the possibility of disagreement, we are getting less than promised by the definition of Skepticism at *PH* I 8:

[A]n ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and things which are thought of in any way whatsoever, an ability from which we come, through the equipollence in the opposed things and arguments, first to suspension of judgment, and after that to undisturbedness.

In the five passages discussed above, there is no real equipollence of opposing arguments simply because one of the arguments is currently missing.<sup>17</sup> At *PH* I 34, Sextus explicitly says that he is opposing a present argument to a future argument which is currently unavailable in the sense that it is not apparent to him. He should therefore assent to the argument he cannot refute at present instead of suspending judgment.<sup>18</sup> I think, however, that we can offer, on behalf of the Skeptic, a different version of the opposition which makes it possible to avoid the problem in question. For it might be argued that the argument which he actually opposes to the one advanced by his Dogmatic rival is not the argument which might be apparent in the future, but rather (as noted earlier in passing) the very argument based upon the possibility of disagreement. That is to say, when the Skeptic considers a Dogmatic argument on a given topic to which at present he cannot

<sup>17</sup> See de Olaso 1996, 256; and Striker 2001, 127. Cf. Hankinson 1998, 183.

<sup>18</sup> On the basis of *AD* II 473–475, Striker (2001, 127) argues that Sextus should acquiesce in the argument he cannot refute at present. It should be noted, however, that at *PH* I 34 the kind of assent in question is epistemic, whereas at *AD* II 473–475 it is non-epistemic. On this, see Machuca 2009, section 4.

oppose a countervailing argument on the same topic, he instead opposes to it the argument from possible disagreement. This argument, which is based upon the awareness of the limits of our current epistemic situation, is strong enough to make the Skeptic refrain from assenting to the Dogmatic argument he is considering because it appears to him to be as persuasive as the latter argument. This solution applies not only to *PH* I 33f., but to the other four passages as well. For one may argue that the Skeptic is actually opposing the argument from possible disagreement to the arguments which claim that we must agree with the person who is more clever than those of the present and the past, or to the customs and laws on which we all agree, or to the opinion of the majority, or to the shared judgments about the intrinsic value of certain things. The Skeptic thus avoids the conceit and rashness (οἴησις καὶ προπέτεια) that affect his Dogmatic patients (*PH* III 280f.). Indeed, because of his arrogant confidence in his intellectual capacity to apprehend the truth, the Dogmatist rashly assents to the conclusion of the argument he advances without considering the possibility that it might be counterbalanced either by an argument which has already been propounded but which he has not yet heard of, or by an argument which might be propounded in the future. If this interpretation of Sextus' use of the argument from possible disagreement is correct, then the opposition of equipollent arguments found in the five passages examined in this section is not merely possible, but actual, and therefore the use of that argument does not necessarily run counter to the definition of Scepticism.

It could be argued that my solutions to the two problems seemingly posed by the argument from possible disagreement appeal to well-known features of Pyrrhonism. Hence, if those solutions are accepted, then one is led to wonder whether the problems were serious in the first place, whereas if the problems did need to be addressed, then one is led to wonder whether the solutions proposed are correct. Now, I do think that those problems are serious insofar as the argument from possible disagreement in any of its various forms seems to be utterly incompatible with Sextus' account of Pyrrhonism. That in fact is how the argument is seen by the scholars who have examined some of the passages that expound it. But, of course, I also think that the solutions which I have provided on behalf of Sextus are effective insofar as they show how his use of the argument from possible disagreement can in the end be interpreted in a way that makes it compatible with the phenomenological character of the Skeptic's utterances, his characteristic caution and open-mindedness, and his argumentative practice. The fact that these solutions appeal to familiar aspects of the Pyrrhonian outlook does not by itself entail that they are ineffective, which is why it would be necessary to provide one or more reasons for claiming that they do not solve the problems at hand. Nor does that fact entail that the solutions are obvious, since they require coming up with a satisfactory way of applying the familiar features of the Pyrrhonian stance to Sextus' use of the argument from

possible disagreement. It seems to me that part of the reason why specialists have regarded this argument as posing insurmountable problems is that they did not undertake a thorough and systematic examination of it and they somehow presupposed that those problems could not be adequately solved by appealing to the conceptual and argumentative resources of the Pyrrhonian outlook.<sup>19</sup>

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