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Can the Skeptic Search for Truth?

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Abstract: Sextus Empiricus associates the Pyrrhonian stance with the activity of inquiry or investigation. In this paper, I propose to examine the skeptic's involvement in that activity because getting an accurate understanding of the nature and purpose of skeptical inquiry will make it possible to delineate some of the distinctive traits of Pyrrhonism as a kind of philosophy. I defend the minority view among specialists according to which (i) Sextus describes both the prospective Pyrrhonist and the full-fledged Pyrrhonist as inquirers into truth, and (ii) the full-fledged Pyrrhonist can, without inconsistency, engage in truth-directed inquiry.

Keywords: Pyrrhonism, inquiry, truth, suspension of judgment, undisturbedness

1 Introduction

Sextus Empiricus associates the Pyrrhonian stance with the activity of inquiry or investigation. My aim in this paper is to examine the skeptic's involvement in that activity because getting an accurate understanding of the nature and purpose of skeptical inquiry will make it possible to delineate some of the distinctive traits of Pyrrhonism as a kind of philosophy. I defend the minority view among specialists according to which (i) Sextus describes both the prospective Pyrrhonist and the full-fledged Pyrrhonist as inquirers into truth, and (ii) the full-fledged Pyrrhonist can, without inconsistency, engage in truth-directed inquiry.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In Section 2, I quote and examine the three central Sextan passages bearing on the nature and purpose of the Pyrrhonist's philosophical investigation. In Section 3, I present some of the problems that the Pyrrhonist's ongoing engagement in open-minded and truth-directed inquiry allegedly poses for the coherence of his skepticism, and I argue that those problems can be solved. The interpretation I defend differs in important respects from similar interpretations put forth in the literature: I offer a deflationary explanation of the Pyrrhonist's interest in discovering the truth about the matters being investigated, and I view Sextus's account of both the source of doxastic

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disturbance and the practical goal of skepticism as being compatible with the Pyrrhonist's involvement in truth-directed inquiry. In Section 4, I briefly examine the connection between ongoing engagement in inquiry and the maintenance of suspension of judgment, and I consider whether involvement in inquiry is a defining feature of Pyrrhonism.

2 The Skeptic as Inquirer

There are fifteen passages from Sextus's works that are particularly relevant to the question of the goal of Pyrrhonian inquiry. I will label them **P1** to **P15** for ease of discussion. In this section, I quote and analyze the three that most clearly present the skeptic's involvement in inquiry, while in Section 3 I quote and analyze the remaining passages.¹ In the first of the passages quoted below, Sextus distinguishes between three kinds of philosophy; in the second, he explains the appellations of Pyrrhonism; and in the third, he responds to the objection that the Pyrrhonist, because of his suspension of judgment, cannot investigate what the dogmatists talk about.

P1. For those who investigate any matter, the likely result is either a discovery, or a denial of discovery and an admission of inapprehensibility, or a continuation of the investigation (ἐπιμονὴν ζητήσεως). This is perhaps why also with regard to the matters investigated in philosophy some have said that they have discovered the truth, some have asserted that it cannot be apprehended, and others are still investigating (ἔτι ζητοῦσιν). Those called dogmatists in the proper sense of the term think that they have discovered it – for instance, the followers of Aristotle and Epicurus and the Stoics, and some others. Clitomachus and Carneades and other Academics have asserted that it concerns things that are inapprehensible. And the skeptics are [still] investigating (ζητοῦσι δὲ οἱ σκεπτικοί). (*Pyrrhonian Outlines [PH] I 1–3*)

P2. The skeptical approach,² then, is called 'investigative' because of its activity concerning investigation and inquiry; 'suspensive' because of the affection (πάθος) that comes about in the inquirer after the investigation; 'aporetic' either because, with regard to everything, it is in *aporia* and investigates (ἀπορεῖν καὶ ζητεῖν), as some say, or because of its being at a loss (ἀμυχανεῖν) in relation to assent or denial; and 'Pyrrhonian' because Pyrrho appears to us to have attached himself to skepticism more tangibly and more conspicuously than his predecessors. (*PH I 7*)

1 All translations are my own, but I have consulted Bury (1933, 1935, 1949), Mates (1996), Blank (1998), Annas and Barnes (2000) and Bett (2005, 2018).

2 When referring to skepticism, Sextus often employs the expression ἡ σκεπτική ἀγωγή or simply ἡ σκεπτική, by which he means the skeptical way of life, way of thinking, or approach.

P3. If they say that they mean that it is not this kind of apprehension but rather thinking *simpliciter* that should precede investigation, then investigation is not impossible for those who suspend judgment about the reality of non-evident things. For the skeptic is not, I suppose, excluded from thinking that both arises from things that passively strike him and arguments that appear evidently to him, and in no way implies the reality of the things that are thought – for we can think, as they say, not only of real things, but also of unreal ones. For this reason, while both investigating and thinking the person who suspends judgment remains in the skeptical disposition; for it has been shown that he assents to the things that strike him in accordance with a passive appearance insofar as it appears to him.

And consider whether even in this case the dogmatists are not debarred from investigation. For to continue investigating (τὸ ζητεῖν ἔτι) the objects is not inconsistent for those who agree that they do not know how they are in their nature, but for those who think that they know them accurately (ἐπ’ ἀκριβὲς ... γινώσκειν). Indeed, for the latter the investigation has already reached its end, as they suppose, whereas for the former the reason why all investigation is undertaken – the thought that they have not made a discovery – still exists (ἀκμὴν ὑπάρχει). (*PH* II 10–11)

I will make six sets of remarks about these three passages. To begin with, given the three different results of philosophical investigation he singles out in **P1**, Sextus distinguishes between three main kinds of philosophy: the dogmatic, the Academic, and the skeptical (*PH* I 4). In the literature, the Academics’ stance is usually referred to as “negative dogmatism,” but also – albeit much less frequently – as “negative meta-dogmatism” because they do not make first-order assertions about the matters being investigated, but rather a second-order assertion about the possibility of apprehension or knowledge of the truth about such matters. The second-order modal assertion that everything is inapprehensible is again ascribed to Carneades and Clitomachus at *PH* I 226. It might be objected that the claim that matter *x* is inapprehensible is not necessarily second-order. It is so if and only if it is based on second-order reasons: e.g., matter *x* belongs to class *C* and, according to epistemology *E*, everything belonging to *C* is inapprehensible. But the reasons may all be first-order: e.g., the negative dogmatist about matter *x* might be a positive dogmatist about other first-order matters and appeal to his discoveries about those matters in defending his claim that matter *x* is inapprehensible. If the claim that *x* is inapprehensible is supported in this way, then it is a first-order conclusion about matter *x*.³ I agree that it is indeed possible to arrive at a negative conclusion in the suggested way. But in the case of the Academics, the claim that Sextus ascribes to them is a sweeping one applying to a whole class of matters that is based on a second-order view about the limits of our knowledge.⁴ The second position in the

³ This objection was raised by an anonymous referee.

⁴ At this point, a caveat is in order: when referring to the negative meta-dogmatism of the Academics, I restrict myself to the views Sextus ascribes to them, without making any claim about the accuracy of this ascription.

general distinction made in the first sentence of **P1** may well be a negative dogmatism about a given first-order matter that is based on a positive dogmatism about other first-order matters. But when the distinction is applied, in the second sentence, to the whole range of matters investigated in philosophy, the second position is clearly a second-order one. For if the Academics accepted that it is possible to make discoveries about first-order matters, the distinction between the dogmatic and the Academic philosophies would make no sense. It might also be objected that applying the label ‘dogmatic’ or ‘meta-dogmatic’ to the Academic position would look improper in Sextus’s eyes, since in **P1** he observes that those who claim to have discovered the truth are called dogmatists in the proper sense of this term (ἰδιωτῶν), and in **P3** the dogmatists are those who think they know accurately how the objects are in their nature. Note, however, that in at least three passages Sextus explicitly characterizes negative views as dogmatic: he observes that it is dogmatic to affirm that the criterion of truth is unreal (*PH* II 79), to set out the arguments against the reality of the sign with confidence or assent (*Adversus Dogmaticos* [*AD*] II 159), or to claim that the disciplines contribute nothing to wisdom (*Adversus Mathematicos* [*AM*] I 5).⁵

Secondly, although in **P1** the position of the Academics is described as a denial of discovery, it could be argued that they have discovered the inapprehensibility of things. What the Academics deny is the possibility of making first-order discoveries because the nature of things cannot be apprehended. If we interpret the Academics as having made a second-order discovery, then we can apply to them the idea, found in **P3**, that the investigation about a given matter comes to an end whenever one makes a discovery. This would explain why, as **P1** makes clear, the skeptics are depicted as the only ones who continue to investigate: for both the positive dogmatists and the Academics the investigation has already come to an end because they have discovered either a first- or a second-order truth. But are the skeptics really the only ones who may legitimately continue to inquire into truth? I think not, for two reasons. First, a positive dogmatist may inquire into a matter about which he does not yet hold any beliefs – even though he does hold beliefs about other matters. Second, it is possible to combine a less than full belief with investigation: one can hold the belief that *p* and continue to investigate whether *p* because one holds that belief with less than full confidence (cf. Barnes 2007, 323–4). One continues the inquiry into whether *p* in order to gather further evidence bearing on the question whether *p*. In partial defense of Sextus, it should be noted that, at *PH* I 2, he talks

⁵ There is a deeply entrenched practice of using the title *Adversus Mathematicos* VII–XI to refer to *Adversus Dogmaticos* I–V. Not only is this conventional designation incorrect, but it also creates confusion among non-specialists.

of those who claim to have *discovered the truth*, which, as the context makes clear, is to be understood in the sense that they claim to *know that p*, i.e., to have a justified true full belief that *p*. And at *PH* II 11, he talks of those who claim to *know accurately* how things are by nature. If the goal of inquiry is knowledge, then if one knows (or claims to know) the answer to a question, one does not inquire into that question. In the passages under consideration, Sextus is working with that conception of the goal of inquiry – either unconsciously influenced by his philosophical milieu or consciously proceeding in a dialectical manner – though I think he would also regard inquiry into whether *p* as incompatible with fully believing (truly or falsely, justifiably or unjustifiably) that *p* or not-*p*.

Thirdly, the Academics' negative meta-dogmatism is compatible with a thoroughgoing first-order suspension of judgment. In fact, some sources explicitly ascribe suspension of judgment to the Academics.⁶ One may suppose that they suspend judgment about what any given thing is like precisely because they assert that the truth about first-order matters cannot be apprehended: if it is not possible to know how things are, then one cannot but suspend judgment about how they are.⁷ The key difference between the Academic and the Pyrrhonist is that the latter suspends judgment *also* about the question whether things are apprehensible or knowable, and so the Pyrrhonist's suspension is more comprehensive than the Academic's. When contrasting the Pyrrhonian outlook with the negative meta-dogmatism of the New Academy of Carneades and Clitomachus, Sextus points out that "the skeptic expects it to be even possible for some things to be apprehended" (*PH* I 226). Similarly, when explaining the skeptical phrase "All things are inapprehensible," Sextus remarks that he does not assert that all the non-evident matters investigated dogmatically that he has inspected are of such a nature as to be inapprehensible, but merely reports that they appear so to him owing to the equipollence of the opposites (*PH* I 200). The reason the Pyrrhonist's first-order agnosticism is not the result of the endorsement of the second-order view that it is impossible to apprehend how things really are is that his skepticism is also a meta-agnosticism. It is for this reason that he can remain engaged in open-minded inquiry into truth. By contrast, the Academic's first-order agnosticism does rest on such a second-order epistemological view, which explains why he has abandoned both inquiry into all first-order matters and inquiry into the second-order question

⁶ See *PH* I 232; Cicero, *Academica* (*Acad.*) I 45; Diogenes Laertius (DL) IV 28, 32; Plutarch, *Adversus Colotem* 1122A; Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* XIV 7.15.

⁷ Note in this regard that, at *Acad.* I 45, Cicero claims that Arcesilaus's suspension is based on the acceptance of universal inapprehensibility. Note also that Diogenes Laertius ascribes the same view to the Pyrrhonists when he remarks that "suspenders of judgment (ἐφεκτικοί) are those who suspend judgment about things as being inapprehensible" (DL I 16), which is clearly at variance with Sextus's account of Pyrrhonism.

whether it is possible to know how things really are: the former inquiry will provide no answers because the latter inquiry has already provided a negative answer.

Fourthly, it should be emphasized that it is a mistake to characterize skeptical investigation as endless, never-ending, infinite, or lifelong, and the Pyrrhonist as a perpetual inquirer, as commentators often do.⁸ Such a characterization implies that the Pyrrhonist believes that the quest for truth is doomed to failure because the answers to the questions under investigation cannot be discovered or apprehended,⁹ a belief that would liken his stance to the one ascribed to the Academics in **P1**.¹⁰ It could be objected that, if the Pyrrhonist's investigation has no end in sight, he cannot be a negative meta-dogmatist inasmuch as the latter would not bother to engage in inquiry in the first place. In response, it may be argued that the Academics mentioned by Sextus are no longer engaged in the inquiry into the truth about first-order matters precisely because they believe that it is endless – inasmuch as a positive discovery will never take place – and hence that, if they remained engaged in that activity, they would become perpetual inquirers. Since taking part in such a futile epistemic activity would make no sense, they decided to stop investigating. If the Pyrrhonist kept engaged in an inquiry into *x* that in his view has no end inasmuch as the truth about *x* cannot be found, he would be an unreasonable negative meta-dogmatist: he would continue to take part in an activity he knows to be pointless.

Fifthly, the centrality of the activity of investigation in the skeptic's practice is seen not only in the fact that Sextus distinguishes skepticism from the other two main types of philosophy by reference to the distinct results of that activity, but also in the fact that 'investigative' is, as we are told in **P2**, one of the ways the skeptical approach is called. The reference to the activity of investigation is also found in the explanation of the terms 'suspensive' and 'aporetic'. In addition, as you probably already know, the Greek terms one translates as 'skeptical' and 'skepticism', namely *σκεπτικός* and *σκέψις*, mean 'inquirer' and 'inquiry',

8 See, e.g., Cavini (1981) 540; Sedley (1983) 22; Annas and Barnes (1985) 1; Tarrant (1985) 26; Hankinson (1998) 14, 29, 300 and (2020) 79; Harte and Lane (1999) 158, 171; Barnes (2000) xxi and (2007) 327–8; Spinelli (2000) 49, (2005a) 117 and (2005b) 150; Grgić (2006) 142–4, 156, (2008) 436, 444 and (2014) 654.

9 The claim that the Pyrrhonist rules out the possibility of eventually discovering the truth is explicitly made by, e.g., Tarrant (1985) 26; Laurent (1993) 652; Brunschwig (1995) 322 n. 1, but see 339 n. 1; Palmer (2000) 355.

10 An anonymous referee has objected that one should distinguish between the perspective of the skeptic and that of the commentator: commentators may be right that the skeptic is forced by his own stance to investigate endlessly, even though he would not describe himself as a perpetual inquirer. I agree that this distinction is important. But as far as I can tell, at least most of the commentators mentioned in note 8 take themselves to be characterizing the skeptical stance as depicted by Sextus. If they do not, they are in any case mistaken in claiming that the skeptic is forced by his own stance to investigate endlessly, as I intend to show in this paper.

respectively. Note that, in **P2**, Sextus talks about the activity of inquiring (σκέπτεσθαι) and about the person who inquires (τὸν σκεπτόμενον). Hence, ἡ σκεπτική ἀγωγή literally means “the inquisitive/inquiring approach.”

Lastly, at the beginning of his philosophical journey, the skeptic-to-be is in a state of *aporia* because he does not know how the conflicts of appearances are to be resolved (see *PH* I 12 and *AM* I 6, to be quoted in the next section). But once he suspends judgment and becomes a full-blown skeptic, he is still in that state: in **P2** Sextus refers to the skeptical stance as aporetic, and in other passages he uses ‘aporetic’ as synonymous with ‘skeptical’ and ‘Pyrrhonian’ (*PH* I 221–222, 234) and refers to the skeptics as ‘aporetics’ (*AD* II 76, 78, 80, 99, 160, 278; III 207, 303; IV 66, 68, 105, 246, 340; *AM* I 214). So, is there any difference between the two phases of the skeptic’s philosophical journey? One crucial difference is that the full-blown skeptic is not merely in *aporia* inasmuch as, having carried out a careful inquiry into the disputed issues and having found no answers, he suspends judgment. The person who is only in *aporia* about whether *p* is in a state of mere non-belief regarding *p*, whereas the person who in addition suspends judgment about whether *p* is in a state of non-belief regarding *p* after having considered the question whether *p* and found no answers. Thus, the full-blown skeptic both is in *aporia* and suspends judgment, whereas the prospective skeptic is only in *aporia* because he has not yet engaged in inquiry. Another crucial difference is that the prospective skeptic still believes that there is a truth about the matters under investigation and that it can be apprehended, whereas the full-blown skeptic suspends judgment about both questions.

3 Truth-Directed Inquiry

Sextus’s description of the Pyrrhonist as an inquirer into truth has been called into question by most interpreters. It has been argued that such a description faces at least five problems that show that truth-directed inquiry and skepticism are incompatible or that there is a gap between the theory and the practice of skepticism,¹¹ and hence that Sextus is wrong in claiming that the Pyrrhonist continues to search for truth¹² or that skepticism is a kind of philosophy.¹³ Some interpreters

11 See Janáček (1972) 28; Barnes (1990) 11; Marchand (2010) 129. Cf. Mates (1996) 240.

12 See Barnes (2000) xxx. This is also the view of Striker (2001) 114, 126–9, who argues in addition that the portrayal of the skeptic as someone who does not give up the quest for truth fits the Academic skeptics much more adequately than it fits the Pyrrhonists. Palmer (2000) 363–4, too, maintains that the Academic skeptic, not the Pyrrhonist, can be characterized as an inquirer into truth, although he does not think that Sextus claims to be searching for truth.

13 See Barnes (2007) 329. Cf. Striker (2001) 121–4 and Grgić (2006) 153.

have even maintained that Sextus does not actually depict the Pyrrhonist as an inquirer into truth.¹⁴ In what follows, I will examine three of the problems in question and argue that they can be explained away; while the first two can be dealt with easily, the third will require a more extensive discussion. The remaining two problems – which concern the skeptic’s use of the Five Modes of Agrippa and of what I call “the argument from possible disagreement” – will not be addressed in the present paper because I have dealt with them elsewhere (see Machuca 2011a, 157–8; 2015, 28–9).

The first alleged problem is that the skeptic is not able to continue the search for truth once he has suspended judgment across the board, since the activity of investigation presupposes both the belief that there is a truth and the conviction that it can be found.¹⁵ It is plain that someone who believes that *x* exists and can be found searches for it more confidently than someone who suspends judgment about both its existence and its knowability. But if the latter person happens to have a curious or inquisitive temperament, he may well undertake the quest for *x* precisely because he is open-minded: he excludes neither the possibility that *x* exists nor the possibility that he will eventually find it. Hence, searching for truth would be pointless only to those who deny that there is a truth or that it can be known.

The second alleged problem is that, judging from **P2**, the terms ‘investigative’ and ‘suspensive’ are incompatible: given that suspension is attained *after* the investigation is over (cf. DL IX 70), having a suspensive attitude is incompatible with the continuation of the investigation.¹⁶ Suspending judgment should be regarded as a way of terminating inquiry. This problem is merely apparent. After each and every inquiry he has so far carried out, the Pyrrhonist has suspended judgment, but this should not be understood as something that happens once and for all because he does not rule out the possibility that his epistemic situation might change. As we saw in the previous section, he does not exclude the possibility that his investigation about any matter might result in a discovery because he does not make the modal claim that truth is unknowable. Given that his suspension is provisional, he can legitimately remain engaged in ongoing truth-directed inquiry: he is willing to open-mindedly consider new arguments and doctrines advanced by his rivals or old ones that are presented to him in a different light. This open-mindedness is reflected in the following remarks that Sextus frequently makes: (i) the disagreements that the skeptic has examined have so far remained unresolved (*PH* III 70; *AD* II 257, 427–428; V 229); (ii) up to now, a criterion of truth

14 See Palmer (2000) 366 and Włodarczyk (2000) 57.

15 See Aubenque (1985) 101 and Marchand (2010) 126. Cf. Włodarczyk (2000) 57.

16 See Janáček (1972) 28–9 and Barnes (2007) 327.

has not been found (*PH* III 70), but the skeptic is still investigating it (*PH* II 53); (iii) when the skeptic says that everything appears undetermined or inapprehensible, he is only referring to the matters he has investigated (*PH* I 198–200) and does not discount the possibility that some things may be apprehended (*PH* I 226); and (iv) for the moment, the skeptic refrains from affirming or denying any of the non-evident matters under investigation (*PH* I 201).

The third problem is more serious. Consider the following three passages, in which Sextus describes the Pyrrhonist's philosophical journey:

P4. The causal principle of the skeptical [approach] is the hope of becoming undisturbed. For men of talent, disturbed by the variation in things (τὴν ἐν τοῖς πράγμασιν ἀνωμαλίαν) and being in *aporia* as to which of them they should rather assent to, came to investigate what is true in things and what is false, so as to become undisturbed as a result of this distinction. But the main constitutive principle of the skeptical [approach] is that to every argument an equal argument is opposed. For we think that because of this we cease to dogmatize (εἰς τὸ μὴ δογματίζειν).¹⁷ (*PH* I 12)

P5. Up to now, we say that the skeptic's aim is undisturbedness in matters of opinion and moderation of affection in things unavoidable (τὴν ἐν τοῖς κατὰ δόξαν ἀταραξίαν καὶ ἐν τοῖς κατηναγκασμένοις μετριπάθειαν). For having begun to philosophize with the aim of deciding among the appearances and apprehending which are true and which false, so as to become undisturbed, he encountered an equipollent disagreement (ἰσοσθενῆ διαφωνίαν); being unable to decide it, he suspended judgment. And while he was suspending judgment, undisturbedness in matters of opinion closely followed him by chance. (*PH* I 25–26)

P6. The skeptics hoped to acquire undisturbedness by deciding the variation in the things that appear and that are thought, but being unable to do this, they suspended judgment. And while they were suspending judgment, undisturbedness closely followed them by chance, as it were, as a shadow [closely follows] a body. (*PH* I 29)

Sextus tells us that skeptics began to do philosophy because they were disturbed by the variations they found in things and thought they would be able to rid themselves of such disturbance if they could determine which appearances are true and which are false. But when they could not make such a distinction and then suspended judgment, they unexpectedly achieved the state of undisturbedness. What is then the point of continuing the investigation once the skeptic has attained what he was looking for from the very beginning? Given that the search for truth seems to have been conceived *only* as a means to achieving undisturbedness, once he reaches his goal the skeptic is no longer interested in philosophical inquiries (Striker 2001, 117–8). The above question is more pressing if, as has been claimed,

¹⁷ I translate *δογματίζειν* as 'to dogmatize' to make clear the connection with 'dogmatism' and 'dogmatist'. The Greek *δόγμα* can be taken to mean 'belief', and so *δογματίζειν* can be taken to refer to the holding of beliefs.

the disturbance experienced by the prospective skeptic was the product, not so much of the conflict of appearances, but of the desire to find the truth (Barnes 2007, 329). To solve this problem, most interpreters have argued that the goal of the prospective skeptic's investigation is different from that of the full-fledged skeptic's investigation. The latter is an inquiry that does not consist in the search for truth, but rather in the examination of dogmatic arguments and doctrines in order to construct conflicts between positions of equal strength because this makes it possible to maintain the states of suspension and undisturbedness. With the continuation of the investigation the full-fledged skeptic seeks to maintain the state of mental tranquility that has been his goal from the outset of his philosophical journey.¹⁸ Richard Bett is among those who maintain that the skeptic's inquiry into truth and his search for undisturbedness through suspension are incompatible activities. He claims: "If one has decided that suspension of judgment is the surest route to tranquility, and therefore concentrates on producing and maintaining suspension of judgment, one is no longer trying to discover the truth" (Bett 2013, 392). In his view, once the skeptic "finds that tranquility is in fact achieved after the search for truth fails and suspension of judgment ensues instead, the project of inquiry seems to be replaced by a project of developing an expertise in the production of equally powerful opposing arguments" (393). For this reason, he regards "the notion of the skeptic as a genuine inquirer as [an] anomalous element" (*ibid.*). In support of his interpretation, Bett refers to the following two texts, in which Sextus offers a definition of skepticism and examines whether the Pyrrhonist inquires into natural phenomena:

P7. The skeptical [approach] is an ability to set up oppositions (δύναμις ἀντιθετική) among things that appear and things that are thought in any way whatsoever, an ability from which, because of the equipollence (ἰσοσθένειαν) in the opposed objects and arguments, we come first to suspension of judgment and after that to undisturbedness. (*PH I 8*)

P8. For we do not inquire into natural phenomena (οὐ φυσιολογοῦμεν) in order to make assertions with secure confidence (μετὰ βεβαίου πείσματος ἀποφάνεσθαι) about any of the matters dogmatically treated in relation to the inquiry into natural phenomena (τῶν κατὰ τὴν φυσιολογίαν δογματιζομένων). But we do touch on this inquiry in order to be able to oppose to every argument an equal argument and for the sake of undisturbedness. In this way, too, we approach the logical and ethical parts of so-called philosophy. (*PH I 18*)

18 See Hiley (1987) 189–93; Couloubaritsis (1990) 12–6; Loeb (1998) 205–7, 209, 214; Harte and Lane (1999) 158; Palmer (2000) 355, 367–9; Striker (2001) 118; Grgić (2006) 143, 153, 156; Thorsrud (2009) 131, 135–6, 161; Bett (2010) 188–9 and (2013) 389, 392–4, 397, 408; Marchand (2010) 134–9 and (2019) 268–9; Veres (2020) 106, 108, but see 114, 116, 118.

Bett points out that in **P7** there is no reference to the skeptic's engagement in the ongoing search for truth and that this passage is in line with **P8**.¹⁹ In this connection, Palmer (2000) 366 and Włodarczyk (2000) 57 remark that in **P1** and **P2** Sextus does not mention truth as the object of the skeptic's ongoing inquiry or that he is careful not to say that the skeptic keeps on inquiring into truth.

The solution to the third problem proposed by most interpreters faces at least three serious difficulties. The first is that Sextus makes it entirely clear that the full-blown skeptic's investigation is truth-directed. Note, to begin with, that **P1** does not say that Pyrrhonism differs from the other two kinds of philosophy in that the Pyrrhonist has ceased to investigate philosophical matters with the aim of finding the truth about them, but in that he is still engaged in the same investigation. The natural way of construing the comparison between the three kinds of philosophy is that their champions share the same activity, the same object of investigation, and the same aim, but differ in the results they have so far obtained. Otherwise, the very idea of the *continuation* of the investigation would make no sense. Imagine a physician who runs multiple tests on a large number of patients with the aim of discovering the cause of a disease. If he tells you that he claims neither to have discovered the cause of the disease nor that it cannot be found, but that he keeps on investigating, what he clearly means is that he is still trying to discover the cause of the disease. In addition, as Casey Perin remarks, if the activity in which the skeptic is still engaged is not the search for truth, "it would not come to an end, as it does, once the person engaged in it thinks, as the Dogmatist does, that he has discovered either the truth about the matter being investigated or that the truth about this matter can't be discovered" (Perin 2018, 118). It might be argued that whereas the full-fledged Pyrrhonist continues the investigation both in the sense that he keeps engaged in the same activity as the prospective Pyrrhonist and in the sense that the object of that activity is the same, its goal is now different. That is to say, the full-fledged Pyrrhonist continues to examine the conflicting dogmatic arguments not to find the truth about the matters on which these arguments bear, but to create a situation of equipollence that will induce suspension, which in turn will make it possible to maintain undisturbedness. In reply, note, first, that in **P1** that there is no indication that there is such a fundamental change. But secondly, and more importantly, if its goal were changed, what would such an activity consist in exactly? The very activity of inquiry seems to consist in trying to determine whether any of the conflicting views on *p* is correct or where the truth concerning *p* lies. After repeatedly obtaining the same result, the Pyrrhonist may well expect to find himself in a state of suspension after each new investigation, and he may well desire that to occur if he continues to see undisturbedness as a mental state that is

¹⁹ I will examine **P7** and **P8** in detail below.

worth attaining and that might continue to accompany suspension. But such an expectation and such a desire entail neither that the Pyrrhonist is no longer concerned with the truth about the matters under investigation nor that he discounts the possibility of ever finding it.

Note, in addition, that the passages describing the Pyrrhonist's philosophical journey (**P4–P6**, but also *AM I 6*, to be quoted below) tell us that he approached philosophy to investigate which of the conflicting appearances is true and which is false. If he continues to be engaged in this investigation, then he continues to be embarked on the project of determining whether any one of the conflicting appearances is to be preferred to the others because of its being true. Also, in **P3** Sextus remarks that skeptics continue to investigate because they do not know how things are in their nature and because they have not made a discovery. Thus, the continuation of the investigation means to keep trying to know or discover what things are really like: to investigate the objects is to investigate how they are in their nature. By saying, in **P3**, that the reason why every investigation is undertaken is *still* present for the skeptic, Sextus makes it clear that the full-fledged skeptic's investigation is not different from that of the prospective skeptic. *Pace* Palmer (2000, 368–9), I find no grounds whatsoever for claiming that in **P3** Sextus is not describing the goal of the skeptic's own inquiry but merely arguing *ad hominem*. For, in that text, he is responding to an objection raised to the skeptic by explaining how it is that the skeptic can remain engaged in inquiry, and his explanation is in perfect accord not only with what we are told in **P1**, but also with his account of the skeptic's non-doxastic assent to appearances (*PH I 13, 19*).

It should also be remarked that, if the skeptic's inquiring activity consisted in producing oppositions among equipollent arguments with the aim of inducing suspension and then undisturbedness, then texts such as the following would make no sense at all:

P9. And when we investigate whether the underlying object is such as it appears, we grant that it appears, and we do not investigate what appears (τοῦ φαινομένου) but what is said about what appears; and this is different from investigating what appears itself. For example, it appears to us that honey sweetens. This we concede, for we are perceptually sweetened (γλυκαζόμεθα [...] αἰσθητικῶς). But if, in addition, it is sweet, as far as the argument goes, is something we investigate; that is not what appears but what is said about what appears. (*PH I 19–20*)

P10. We say, then, that the criterion of the skeptical approach is what appears, implicitly meaning by this the appearance (τὴν φαντασίαν); for given that this appearance lies in feeling and involuntary affection (πεισεί [...] καὶ ἀβουλήτῳ πάθει), it is not subject to investigation (ἀζήτητος). Hence, probably no one will dispute whether the underlying object appears this way or that; rather, what is investigated is whether it is such as it appears. (*PH I 22*)

Investigating whether the underlying object is as it appears to be is an epistemic enterprise: the skeptic wants to discover, to the best of his ability, what is really the case. If his inquiry were not an epistemic activity, then he would limit himself to noticing that, e.g., honey appears sweet to some but bitter to others (see *PH* I 101, 211, 213; II 63) and that both appearances strike him as being of equal strength. Instead, the skeptic scrutinizes whether honey is really sweet or bitter (or both or neither), and so he is in the business of searching for the truth about honey.

Finally, if the skeptic's inquiry were not truth-directed, it would be difficult to explain the following two passages, in which Sextus is offering some initial remarks about the criterion of truth and exploring the notion of proof:

P11. The investigation of the criterion is everywhere contentious, not only because the human being is by nature a truth-loving animal, but also because [in this investigation] the most generic schools of philosophy make judgments about the most important matters. For either the big and solemn boast of the dogmatists will need to be utterly done away with, if no standard of the true reality of things is discovered, or, conversely, the skeptics will be convicted of being rash and of boldly attacking the common belief, if something appears that is able to guide us towards the apprehension of the truth (ὡς προπετεῖς ἐλέγχεσθαι τοὺς σκεπτικοὺς καὶ τῆς κοινῆς πίστεως κατατολήσαντας, ἐὰν φαίνηται τι τὸ δυνάμενον ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ τὴν τῆς ἀληθείας κατάληψιν ὀδηγεῖν). (*AD* I 27)

P12. But we do not say firmly [that proof is apprehended by philosophical argument], since it would be ludicrous to be still investigating (ἔτι ἐπιζητεῖν) it if we have conceded its reality, but that it turns out to be like this according to its conception. (*AD* II 321)

If the Pyrrhonist were not engaged in an inquiry that aims to discover whether there is a criterion of truth, it would not make any sense for Sextus to say in **P11** that, if the investigation of the criterion resulted in the discovery that there is a standard that makes it possible to apprehend the truth, the Pyrrhonist would be convicted of having attacked the common belief that there is such a criterion and that it can be found. The reason for his criticism of that belief is that it appears to him that, thus far, there is no compelling evidence one way or the other. As for **P12**, the only way to make sense of the remark that, if skeptics already accepted the reality of proof, their ongoing inquiry into proof would be pointless, is by interpreting the skeptics' investigation of proof as consisting in the examination of the epistemic standing of the dogmatic views on proof with the aim of discovering the truth about whether there is such a thing as proof.

The second difficulty faced by the solution proposed by most interpreters is that the skeptic's suspension results from the careful scrutiny of issues regarding which he has so far found no answers. As we saw above, "suspension of judgment is so called from the fact that the intellect is suspended so as neither to accept nor to reject anything because of the equipollence of the matters investigated" (*PH* I 196).

Equipollence is defined as “the equality with respect to credibility and lack of credibility (τὴν κατὰ πίστιν καὶ ἀπιστίαν ἰσότητα), so that none of the conflicting arguments takes precedence over any other as more credible (πιστότερον)” (*PH I* 10), and as “the equality with respect to what appears persuasive (πιθανόν) to us” (*PH I* 190; cf. *DL IX* 79). Also, when explaining “I suspend judgment,” Sextus points out that this phrase indicates that “things appear to us equal in respect of credibility and lack of credibility. Whether they are equal, we do not affirm: we say what appears to us about them, when they manifest themselves to us” (*PH I* 196). Lastly, when explaining “To every argument an equal argument is opposed,” he observes that it is to be understood as meaning “To every argument investigated by me that establishes something dogmatically, there appears to me to be opposed another argument, which establishes something dogmatically, equal to it in respect of credibility and lack of credibility” (*PH I* 203). By my lights, these passages show that there is both a psychological and an epistemic aspect to equipollence. Psychological, because equipollence refers to the way the skeptic is affected by the conflicting arguments: rather than affirming that they are equally persuasive or credible in an objective sense, he limits himself to reporting that they appear equipollent to him. Epistemic, because the conflicting arguments strike the skeptic as being of equal strength as far as their epistemic credentials are concerned. The investigation that has so far resulted in suspension is an epistemic activity inasmuch as, in the course of this activity, each argument’s epistemic standing is weighed up in order to determine whether any of them is to be preferred to the others as more credible or persuasive. If this is correct, then the skeptic is not merely interested in developing an expertise in the production of equipollent arguments, but rather carries out a genuine investigation that aims to find the truth – if any there is – about the matters under scrutiny.

It might be objected that my interpretation renders the Pyrrhonist inconsistent because he cannot weigh up the epistemic credentials of conflicting arguments without implicitly endorsing some criterion of truth or justification. In reply, we should not forget, first, that the Pyrrhonist is a thinking being (*PH I* 24) and that, *qua* thinking being, he may be influenced by certain criteria of truth and justification that are common in his social and philosophical milieu, even though he refrains from endorsing them. And secondly, this lack of endorsement of such criteria does not mean that he cannot avail himself of them to assess the epistemic standing of the conflicting arguments under investigation. Since he suspends judgment about such criteria rather than reject them, he may put them to the test to see whether they enable him to determine which view (if any) is to be preferred or whether the epistemic credentials of any given view are strong enough. The fact that he does not endorse the criteria in question does not entail that he should be

utterly unimpressed by the results of their application or that he should permanently distrust the results of any rational assessment.

The third difficulty faced by the solution favored by most interpreters is that, if the Pyrrhonist's inquiry is designed to maintain suspension by producing equally powerful conflicting arguments, then, when examining any issue, he will deliberately choose specific conflicting arguments that, as it appears to him, might strike him as having the same force, while ignoring others that, as it appears to him, might alter such a balance. If at some point in the course of the exercise of the skeptical ability described in **P7** the Pyrrhonist stumbled upon an argument that struck him as being more persuasive or credible than the others, he would immediately stop attending to it, with the hope of maintaining suspension. But in doing so, he would be deceiving himself and maintaining suspension artificially. Does any of this sound reasonable as a description of the Pyrrhonist's stance? Is any of this in keeping with the open-minded attitude that Sextus's ascribes to the Pyrrhonist? When Sextus writes, e.g., that the dispute about what is up to us "remains undecidable since we have not up to now discovered a criterion of truth" (*PH* III 70) or that, since there has so far been an unresolved disagreement about whether the sign is perceptible or intelligible, one must say that the sign is still non-evident (*AD* II 257), these remarks would make no sense unless the Pyrrhonist was concerned with carrying out an open-minded inquiry into the matters under consideration, assessing the epistemic standing of all the arguments he knows of. If he deliberately set aside some of them, why would he say that he has so far been unable to discover a criterion of truth or that the disagreement about the nature of the sign has as yet remained unresolved? It follows from the interpretation under consideration that, even if, e.g., one of the criteria of truth proposed by the dogmatists were more credible than the others, the Pyrrhonist would purposely ignore it, and hence he would be lying because he would not have really attempted to discover the correct criterion of truth. Rather, he would have deliberately refused to consider the epistemic status of one of the dogmatic views on the criterion of truth. In that case, the reason why the Pyrrhonist has not up to now discovered a standard of truth is simply that he has not really searched for it. All of this sounds absurd to me because the Pyrrhonist is not blind to the evidence. Moreover, if skeptical inquiry were designed to artificially induce and maintain suspension, then the skeptic's arguments and writings could be legitimately dismissed out of hand by his dogmatic rivals. Why engage skeptics in debate or read their writings if they are not really interested in assessing the epistemic credentials of the views under scrutiny? One reason a dogmatist could read Sextus is to see whether his own positive views can withstand the skeptic's dialectical assault, regardless of what Sextus himself is up to as a skeptic. This would be a methodological use of skepticism, similar to that which is characteristic of contemporary epistemological

discussions of skepticism. But note that, if the skeptic's inquiry were not an epistemic endeavor, dogmatists could rightly accuse him of being disingenuous and of not being in the business of philosophy any longer: despite remarking that he investigates whether the object is such as it appears (**P9–P10**), the skeptic is not actually trying to find out what is really the case.

It could be objected that attributing to the rejected interpretation of the nature of Pyrrhonian inquiry the notion of artificially maintaining suspension is contentious. If it means that the skeptic does not find the opposing arguments equally balanced and yet suspends judgment anyway, then he is an incompetent skeptic inasmuch as he has not really mastered the skeptical ability. If it means that he willfully ignores a stronger argument in favor of a weaker one that does the job of counterbalancing, then again he is an incompetent skeptic because he should be able to find the necessary counterbalancing arguments. In my view, if the exercise of the skeptical ability with respect to a given issue does not lead a skeptic to suspension, this does not necessarily mean that he is incompetent, for it is possible for an argument bearing on that issue to be stronger than its rival arguments. If the skeptic ruled out that possibility, this would mean that he believes that the truth about the matters under investigation cannot be found because there are always equally powerful arguments both pro and con any matter whatsoever, and that any competent skeptic is able to find those arguments. This is at variance with Sextus's stance, for when explaining the skeptical phrase "To every argument an equal argument is opposed," he remarks that by 'every' he means every argument he has inspected (*PH* I 202), thereby making it clear that he does not claim that every argument that might be advanced can be opposed by an equally powerful counterargument.

The rejected interpretation was proposed as a solution to the third problem faced by Sextus's description of the skeptic as an inquirer into truth: why does the skeptic remain engaged in truth-oriented inquiry once he has attained undisturbedness? In answering this question, we should bear in mind that there may be reasons other than the desire to attain undisturbedness for the prospective Pyrrhonist to embark on philosophical investigation (Machuca 2006, 136–7), and hence that the full-blown Pyrrhonist may have a reason to remain engaged in the inquiry into truth even after attaining undisturbedness. Casey Perin (2006, 2010) opposes those who maintain that the Pyrrhonist takes undisturbedness to be attained only through suspension and, hence, replaces the discovery of truth with suspension as the means to achieving that state of mind, with the result that he loses any interest in the search for truth. Perin correctly argues that Sextus's claim, in **P4** and **P5**, that the Pyrrhonist engaged in the search for truth with the aim of attaining undisturbedness neither amounts to nor entails the claim that the Pyrrhonist did so *only* to attain that state of mind. Sextus does not exclude the

possibility that the Pyrrhonist “engages in the search for truth *both* for its own sake *and* for the sake of tranquility” (Perin 2010, 15). If the Pyrrhonist did not have an interest in the discovery of truth for its own sake, then he would lack the motive for seeking undisturbedness. For Sextus tells us, in **P4** and **P5**, that the Pyrrhonist seeks undisturbedness because he is distressed by the unresolved conflict of appearances and, hence, by his not knowing whether *p* or not-*p* is the case. This means that the Pyrrhonist has an interest in knowing, and hence a desire to know, whether *p* or not-*p* is the case. The fact that such a desire is unsatisfied is a source of distress for him, and it is this distress that motivates his desire for undisturbedness. Thus, the Pyrrhonist’s interest in knowing the truth cannot be an interest in this knowledge as a means to undisturbedness, i.e., cannot presuppose the desire for undisturbedness, since that interest is ultimately the source of this desire (2010, 24). Perin also claims that, given that the Pyrrhonist has an interest in the discovery of truth for its own sake but lacks any such interest in suspension, he has a reason to prefer the former to the latter as a means to undisturbedness (2010, 23–4). Note that the view that the skeptic has an interest in truth for its own sake finds some support in the following passage, where Sextus tells us that skeptics approached both philosophy and the disciplines with the desire to learn the truth, but suspended judgment when confronted with a conflict among equipollent positions:

P13. [The skeptics] experienced the same sort of thing with regard to the disciplines (μαθημάτων) as they did with regard to the whole of philosophy. For just as they approached the latter with the desire to reach the truth, but suspended judgment when confronted with the equipollent conflict and the variation of things (ἰσοσθενεῖ δὲ μάχη καὶ ἀνωμαλίᾳ τῶν πραγμάτων), so too with regard to the disciplines they set out to acquire them, seeking to learn the truth here as well, but when they discovered equal *aporias*, they did not conceal them. (*AM I 6*)

Remarkably, in **P13** there is no mention of the skeptic’s pursuit and attainment of undisturbedness.²⁰ One may infer from this that the Pyrrhonist began to philosophize also because he had an independent interest in the discovery of truth.

Although I agree with Perin that the Pyrrhonist can, without inconsistency, continue the search for truth because he has an interest in the discovery of truth for its own sake, I have two points of disagreement with his interpretation.²¹ The first concerns Perin’s failure to distinguish the different stages of the skeptic’s

²⁰ On the basis of **P13** and three other passages (*PH I 12, 25, 232*), I have elsewhere argued that neither the pursuit nor the attainment of undisturbedness should be regarded as essential to Pyrrhonism. See Machuca (2006, 2020).

²¹ Other interpreters who defend the view that the skeptic is engaged in the search for truth include McPherran (1989) 165–6, Everson (1991) 125 and Hankinson (1998) 29–30.

philosophical journey. With regard to the option of continuing the investigation (*PH I 1–3*), Perin claims that, “as Sextus indicates elsewhere (*PH I 12, 25–29*), it is the Skeptic’s desire for tranquility, together with the fact that it appears to him that he can achieve tranquillity by discovering the truth, that explains why the Skeptic exercises this option” (Perin 2010, 8). This claim is no doubt inexact because, whereas at *PH I 1–3* there is no mention of undisturbedness and Sextus is talking about the *full-blown* skeptic, at *PH I 12* and *25–29*, where the search for undisturbedness is discussed, he is talking about how the *prospective* skeptic sought to attain that state of mind. Thus, Perin seems to be conflating the beginning of the skeptic’s philosophical journey, a stage at which he was still a dogmatist, and the present stage of that journey, at which he is already an out-and-out skeptic.²² For this reason, I find problematic Perin’s claim that “the Skeptic pursues the discovery of truth rather than suspension of judgment as a means to tranquillity” (2010, 23). For, to the best of my knowledge, nowhere does Sextus say that the *full-blown* skeptic seeks to attain undisturbedness by discovering the truth. We must bear in mind that, up to now, the skeptic has achieved undisturbedness *only* when he suspended judgment, so that it non-doxastically appears to him that he will remain undisturbed if he continues to suspend judgment.²³ Of course, he does not rule out the possibility that this will change in the future, but from this we cannot infer that he prefers the discovery of truth to suspension of judgment as a means to undisturbedness.

My second disagreement with Perin concerns his interpretation of a Sextan argument he calls “the value argument” (2010, 13). According to this argument, if one believes that something is good, one will be disturbed if one lacks it, and otherwise disturbed by the prospect of losing it; and if one believes that something is bad, one will be disturbed if one has it, and otherwise disturbed by the prospect of getting it (*PH I 27–28*; *III 237–238*). Whereas in **P4** and **P5** we are told that what produces distress is the fact that one does not know whether something is, e.g., good or bad, at *PH I 27–28* and *III 237–238* we are told that what produces distress is having the belief that something is good or bad. In Perin’s view, not only is the

²² Perin himself at certain points distinguishes between the person who *becomes* a skeptic and the person who *is already* a skeptic (Perin 2010, 14, 17). Although nowhere does Sextus distinguish between the prospective skeptic and the full-blown skeptic, this distinction is in perfect accord with his account of why the skeptic began to do philosophy and how he ended up suspending judgment. Let me also note that the reason why I say that the prospective skeptic is a dogmatist is that, although he is in a state of *aporia* regarding which appearances are true and which are false, he still believes, as observed in the preceding section, that there is a truth about the matters under investigation and that it can be apprehended.

²³ Of course, the skeptic does not believe that there is a causal connection between suspension and undisturbedness (see, e.g., Machuca 2006, 116–7).

value argument “very much like a piece of dogmatism” (2010, 13), but also Sextus should discard it because it is incompatible with the search for truth. For in those cases in which a person is disturbed by his holding beliefs about anything being good or bad by nature, undisturbedness can be achieved only through suspension insofar as any belief of that sort produces distress, even if it is “a true belief formed as a result of investigation on the basis of considerations that establish its truth” (*ibid.*). In such cases, discovering the truth about the value of something, and thus forming the belief that it is good or bad, is not a means but an obstacle to undisturbedness (2010, 25). Although I agree with Perin that there is some degree of tension here between epistemic and practical goals, I think there are four reasons to claim that the value argument should not be discarded.

The first reason is that it is not “a piece of dogmatism” because it is not to be understood as an argument to which the Pyrrhonist is doxastically committed, i.e., as an argument he believes to be sound. Rather, it is to be understood as a dialectical argument when he uses it while engaging the dogmatists in debate, and as a report of the way things appear to him when he is describing his own experience. In neither case is there any reason for the Pyrrhonist not to say that those who hold evaluative beliefs are disturbed: if the argument succeeds in counterbalancing those advanced by the dogmatists, then it is dialectically effective; and if the report strikes him as an accurate description of the way he is affected, then he would be lying if he said something different.

The second reason is that the value argument fits well with Perin’s explanation of the source of the prospective Pyrrhonist’s disturbance. He maintains, as we saw, that the prospective Pyrrhonist seeks undisturbedness because he is disturbed, and that he is disturbed because he desires to know the truth for its own sake but has been unable to satisfy such desire. I think there is a reason for his desire to discover the truth. I have elsewhere argued that in Sextus’s works it is possible to identify three sources of doxastic disturbance – namely, the existence of unresolved conflicts of appearances, the holding of beliefs in general, and the holding of evaluative beliefs in particular – and that they are actually related.²⁴ First, the prospective skeptic was distressed by the existence of unsettled conflicts of appearances because he believed this to be something bad, the reason being that he took the discovery of truth to be something valuable. Second, holding non-evaluative beliefs (understanding belief in p as taking p to be true) is a source of disturbance only insofar as one also holds the belief that believing what is true is of objective value. If this is correct, then dogmatists take having true beliefs and avoiding false ones to be something good: approaching the truth about the matters under investigation is an aim that is taken to be of intrinsic and real value. My

²⁴ See Machuca (2019a); cf. Machuca (2011b) 253, (2013) 209 and (2019b) 216 n. 17.

suggestion is, then, that the prospective skeptic desires to know the truth about the matters into which he inquires because he believes that knowledge of the truth is something good, and so becomes distressed when failing to acquire that knowledge, i.e., that good.²⁵ Hence, I think that Perin is wrong in saying that, “when [the skeptic] has suspended judgment about the matter but is once again distressed by the fact that he does not know whether *p*, he pursues the discovery of truth rather than suspension of judgment as the means to tranquillity” (2010, 26). If the skeptic were once again troubled by the fact that he does not know whether *p*, this would mean that he is once again holding the belief that knowing the truth is of objective value, and given his past experience, it would non-doxastically appear to him that it is preferable to try to achieve undisturbedness by getting rid of that disturbing belief rather than by discovering the truth.

If my interpretation of the sources of doxastic disturbance found in Sextus’s texts is on the right track, then the importance of the value argument lies in that it enables us to explain why the prospective skeptic approached philosophy: it offers the final step of Perin’s explanation, which appeals to an unsatisfied desire, since it explains why the prospective skeptic desires to know the truth and hence embarks on its search. But what about the full-blown skeptic’s engagement in truth-directed inquiry? Since he lacks the belief that discovering the truth is good or valuable, the likely reason why he remains engaged in truth-directed inquiry is his own contingent psychological constitution: he has an inquisitive and curious

²⁵ Bett (2020) 11 n. 11 rejects my distinction in Machuca (2019a) between three rather than two sources of doxastic disturbance on the grounds that the existence of unresolved conflicts of appearances and the holding of non-evaluative beliefs actually amount to the same thing: “The person who is troubled by not having been able to decide among the conflicting appearances no doubt has a number of beliefs, along with an uncomfortable sense that these beliefs may not be anchored in the nature of things; the beliefs and the unresolved inquiry are both parts of a single package. And when Sextus speaks of *ataraxia* following from a generalized suspension of judgment (*PH* I 26, 29), he can quite well be read as referring to this person’s withdrawal from *both* the attempt to decide among the appearances *and* to their withdrawal from the beliefs that they hold in this state of uncomfortable uncertainty.” In reply, let me first remark that whereas the reason why the prospective Pyrrhonist is disturbed by his inability to resolve conflicts of appearances is that he regards the failure to discover the truth as bad, the reason why he is disturbed by his holding non-evaluative beliefs is that he regards believing what is true as good. Secondly, although the prospective Pyrrhonist believes that there is a truth and that knowing it is of objective value, he does not hold beliefs about the issues regarding which he has conflicting appearances inasmuch as he is in state of *aporia* as to which conflicting appearances he should assent to. Thirdly, by suspending his former beliefs the Pyrrhonist does not abandon his attempt to resolve the conflicts of appearances inasmuch as his ongoing engagement in the inquiry into truth consists in the examination of whether any one of the conflicting appearances corresponds to how things really are. Of course, Bett would not agree with this third remark because, as we saw, he does not think that the Pyrrhonist is engaged in truth-directed inquiry.

temperament that has been shaped by such factors as his upbringing, education, life experiences, socio-cultural milieu, and philosophical training. Just as the full-blown skeptic's desire for undisturbedness differs from that of the prospective skeptic in that the latter does, while the former does not, believe that that state of mind is something valuable by nature, so too does the full-blown skeptic's interest in philosophical investigation differ from that of the prospective skeptic in that the latter does, while the former does not, believe that knowing the truth is something valuable by nature.²⁶ I propose a deflationary reading of both the full-blown skeptic's search for undisturbedness and his engagement in truth-oriented investigation according to which these are mere preferences with which he is left after suspending judgment and to which he has no doxastic commitment.

With respect to the third reason for thinking that the value argument should not be discarded, note that, if my interpretation of the real source of doxastic disturbance is correct, then if one suspends all evaluative beliefs – including the belief that discovering the truth about any matter is in itself valuable – one can still hold non-evaluative beliefs without being disturbed. Hence, if after carrying out an inquiry the Pyrrhonist discovered the truth about a non-evaluative matter, thereby acquiring a belief about what the truth regarding that matter is, he would of course cease to be a Pyrrhonist, but it seems that he would not lose his undisturbedness unless he acquired the additional belief that believing the truth in question is of objective value.

As for my final reason for disagreeing with Perin about whether the value argument should be discarded, it is worth emphasizing that the skeptic does not believe or claim to know that holding evaluative beliefs, whether true or false, is a cause of disturbance, but merely reports that that is how it appears to him to be. Insofar as he is merely reporting an appearance when referring to the obstacle to the attainment and maintenance of undisturbedness and insofar as he suspends judgment, he cannot rule out the possibility that things will not happen the way it appears to him they will happen. That is to say, it could be the case that, even if the Pyrrhonist discovered the truth about an evaluative matter or even if he discovered the truth about a non-evaluative matter and acquired the belief that knowing such a truth is of objective value, undisturbedness would not be lost. He cannot discount that possibility because it also appears to him that, up to this point, he has never

²⁶ I therefore disagree with Máté Veres's (2020, 106) claim that the discovery of truth is a dogmatic goal that Sextus does not endorse. Whereas as a prospective skeptic Sextus did take the discovery of truth to be something valuable he should endeavor to attain, as a full-blown skeptic he is still interested in finding the truth about the matters being investigated, if any there is, because he happens to have an inquisitive and curious temperament.

found the truth – if any there is – about the matters under investigation, and hence he does not know what would happen if he did.

Let me now consider **P7** and **P8**, which Bett regards as incompatible with the engagement in ongoing truth-directed inquiry. It is true that in **P7** there is no *explicit* mention of the inquiry into truth. But note, first, that the passage does mention suspension, which, as noted above, presupposes previous inquiry inasmuch as it is a mental state reached after having carried out inquiries into the various issues about which the skeptic suspends judgment. Second, by my lights, producing oppositions among arguments – which includes contrasting arguments put forth by the dogmatists, coming up with new arguments to be opposed to those put forth by the dogmatists, or even coming up with new arguments both pro and con – is the skeptic’s way of carrying out his inquiries. For it is in this way that he assesses the epistemic standing of the conflicting arguments. If this is so, then saying that suspension is reached after having carried out an investigation amounts to the same as saying that it is reached after having exercised the ability to produce oppositions. The exercise of this ability has thus far, because of the equipollence of the opposed arguments, resulted in suspension, which is why the exerciser of the ability is a skeptic (*PH I* 11). But it may well have a different effect in the future if one of the opposed arguments strikes the exerciser of the oppositional ability as being stronger than the others. Pyrrhonian ζήτησις consists in σκέψις understood as inquiry: it is a particular type of investigation, one that consists in the ability to set up oppositions in order to assess the epistemic credentials of the opposed arguments. If the full-blown Pyrrhonist exercises this ability and finds the opposed items equipollent, then he will remain a skeptic. If he does not, then he will have discovered, by his own lights, the answer to one of the questions being investigated. In that case, he will no longer be a skeptic – given that at *PH I* 223 Sextus says that the person who holds even a single belief is not a skeptic²⁷ – but he might continue to use the oppositional ability in investigating other issues.

As for **P8**, if my interpretation according to which producing oppositions among arguments is the skeptic’s way of carrying out his inquiries is correct, then saying that the skeptic inquires into natural phenomena “in order to be able to oppose to every argument an equal argument and for the sake of undisturbedness” is not at variance with saying that he is engaged in truth-directed inquiry. Someone

²⁷ Sextus explains that, even if Plato sometimes speaks in skeptical fashion, he cannot be deemed a skeptic simply because the person “who dogmatizes [i.e., holds beliefs] about a single thing, or in general prefers one appearance to another in respect of credibility and lack of credibility, or makes assertions about any non-evident matter, adopts the distinctive character of the dogmatist” (*PH I* 223).

might claim that the *καί* is epexegetic: “in order to be able to oppose to every argument an equal argument, that is, for the sake of undisturbedness.” The skeptic thus opposes equal arguments to each other only because this enables him to attain undisturbedness. This interpretation cannot be correct, though: given that in the sentence in question Sextus is referring to the constitutive and the causal principles of skepticism explained in **P4**, if the *καί* were epexegetic, then in **P8** he would be conflating the two principles. Hence, there are two independent reasons for the skeptic’s engagement in the inquiry into natural phenomena. The first reason, which refers to the main constitutive principle of skepticism, is to be explained by reference to the skeptic’s inquisitive and curious temperament, which motivates him to assess the epistemic standing of the conflicting arguments. The skeptic opposes to every argument concerning natural phenomena a rival argument that *prima facie* strikes him as equally persuasive because, by so doing in the course of his inquiry, he weighs up their epistemic credentials. He cannot rule out that, after the inquiry is completed, one of the arguments will strike to him as more persuasive than its rival. It could be objected, though, that the first sentence of **P8** makes it clear that the skeptic does not leave open the possibility of eventually arriving at a justified view as a result of his examination of the epistemic standing of the conflicting arguments. By contrast, I interpret the sentence as saying that the skeptic’s aim in engaging in the inquiry into natural phenomena is not to make assertions in the manner of the dogmatists, that is, without first pondering the competing views on the issue under inquiry. Sextus thinks that dogmatism is characterized by arrogance, rashness, and self-satisfaction (*PH* I 20, 62, 90, 177, 186, 212; II 17, 21; III 2, 235, 280–281) because dogmatists hold fast to their views on *p* without taking careful account of rival views on *p*.

The second reason for the skeptic’s engagement in the inquiry into natural phenomena, which refers to the causal principle of skepticism, is to be explained by a desire that the skeptic happened to have and that he might stop having while remaining a skeptic.²⁸ Given his past experience, it appears to him that, if after the inquiry is completed the opposing arguments strike him as equipollent and he is therefore forced to suspend judgment, he will preserve his undisturbedness. Although the skeptic has the non-doxastic expectation that undisturbedness will be maintained by producing oppositions among arguments that appear equally strong to him, **P8** presents, in my view, the two reasons as independent of each other: if one of them were abandoned, the skeptic would still engage in the inquiry into natural phenomena (or logic or ethics) because of the other. This is confirmed

²⁸ See note 20 above.

by the fact that, once again, the two reasons correspond to the constitutive and the causal principles of skepticism laid out in **P4**.²⁹

I would now like to quote and examine two final texts that seem to run counter to my interpretation of the goal of skeptical investigation. In the first, Sextus is in the course of elucidating the skeptical phrase “To every argument an equal argument is opposed,” while in the second he explains how the skeptic proceeds in the investigation of the sign.

P14. But some also utter the phrase thus: “To every argument an equal argument is to be opposed,” requesting the following as an exhortation: “To every argument that establishes something dogmatically let us oppose an argument that investigates dogmatically, equal in credibility and lack of credibility, and conflicting with it.” To address their statement to the skeptic, they use the infinitive in lieu of the imperative: “to be opposed” in lieu of “let us oppose.” They make this exhortation to the skeptic, lest he be somehow deceived by the dogmatist into giving up the investigation³⁰ and, by being rash, miss the undisturbedness apparent to them, which (as we suggested before) they think supervenes together with suspension of judgment about everything. (*PH I* 204–205)

P15. But at present one must remember the skeptical practice (τὸ σκεπτικὸν ἔθος). This is to expound the arguments against the reality of the sign not with confidence or assent (for to do such a thing would be equivalent to maintaining, like the dogmatists, that a sign exists), but so as to bring the investigation into equipollence (ὥστε εἰς ἰσοσθένειαν τὴν ζήτησιν ἄγειν), that is to say,³¹ to show that it is as credible (πιστόν) that a sign exists as that it does not, or, conversely, that it is as incredible that a sign is real as that it is unreal. For as a result equilibrium and suspension of judgment are produced in the intellect (ἢ ἀρρηψία καὶ ἡ ἐποχὴ γίνεται τῇ διανοίᾳ). And indeed, because of this even he who seems to contradict us, when we say that nothing is an indicative sign, is helping us and, getting ahead of us, he himself constructs the part that should be constructed skeptically. For if the arguments against the sign compiled by the aporetics are extremely strong and almost incontrovertible, and those of

29 Although he is among the few interpreters who claim that the skeptic does, and can, engage in truth-directed inquiry, Perin too regards **P8** as being incompatible with the skeptic’s ongoing investigation. He maintains that in **P8** “Sextus denies that the Skeptic is engaged in philosophical investigation of the natural world,” that Sextus remarks that “the Skeptic is not engaged in philosophy at all” (Perin 2010, 118 n. 6), and that Sextus “writes that the Skeptic investigates topics in the various areas of philosophy ... with a view not to discovering the truth but to creating the kind of conflicts between candidates for belief that induce first ἐποχὴ and then tranquility” (2018, 127 n. 12). I think that, like Bett, Perin fails to realize that producing oppositions among arguments so as to weigh up their epistemic credentials is the skeptic’s main way of carrying out his inquiries. Sextus explicitly points out that the skeptic engages in the inquiry into natural phenomena, and *qua* skeptic he cannot carry out his inquiry by making assertions (otherwise, he would be a dogmatist), but by producing oppositions among arguments so as to evaluate their soundness.

30 I here excise *περὶ αὐτοῦ*, following Annas and Barnes (2000).

31 I interpret the *καὶ* as epexegetic.

the dogmatists establishing its reality are not inferior to the former, one must at once suspend judgment about its reality and not side unfairly with either party. (*AD* II 159–160)

The first thing to note is that in **P14** Sextus is reporting the way others use the phrase “To every argument an equal argument is opposed,” namely, as an exhortation to the skeptic to oppose to every argument a conflicting and equally credible argument. Given that this use is different from Sextus’s own use explained at *PH* I 202–203, one could argue that it cannot be taken to express his own stance on the goal of skeptical investigation. But even setting this point aside, I do not think that **P14** unambiguously says that the skeptic’s inquiry is not truth-directed. The text does give the impression that the only reason why the skeptic should not give up his investigation is that, if he did, he would not attain across-the-board suspension, which has so far been accompanied by undisturbedness. It thus seems that the goal of skeptical investigation is not finding the truth about the matters under scrutiny – if any there is – but inducing suspension and undisturbedness. But note that both the idea of being deceived by the dogmatists into abandoning the investigation and the idea of acting in a rash manner could be taken to indicate that the Pyrrhonist does not want to give his assent to a given claim without having conclusive reasons to do so. If one has stopped inquiring into a given matter because one has been deceived, it seems that one has wrongly believed that one has made a discovery regarding that matter. And if one has stopped suspending judgment about whether *p* is the case because one has acted out of rashness, it seems that one has given one’s assent to a claim without having carefully assessed its epistemic credentials. In both cases, the Pyrrhonist’s concern is epistemic, not pragmatic.

P15 can be taken to undermine my interpretation of the goal of skeptical inquiry because Sextus seems to be saying that the skeptical procedure consists exclusively in bringing the investigation of the sign (or any other matter) into equipollence in order to attain suspension of judgment, and not in assessing the epistemic standing of the conflicting views on the sign (or any other matter). The skeptic wants to maintain the state of suspension no matter whether the conflicting views under scrutiny are really equipollent or no matter whether they would strike the skeptic as being of unequal strength if he examined them more thoroughly. In reply, it should be noted that in **P15** Sextus’s purpose is to make entirely clear that the skeptic does not endorse the arguments against the reality of the sign that he puts forward. And he does not endorse them because the opposing arguments appear to be of equal strength. We should bear in mind that Sextus is describing to the reader an epistemic situation in which, *qua* skeptic, he already finds himself after having assessed the epistemic standing of the arguments pro and con the reality of the sign. He is explaining to the reader how it is that the skeptic’s

investigation has thus far ended up in equipollence (or equilibrium) and suspension.

4 Conclusion

I have argued that Sextus depicts skeptical inquiry as truth-directed and that the skeptic can, without inconsistency, engage in such an inquiry. The skeptic has both epistemic and practical goals. Given that these goals are independent of each other, the skeptic's desire to maintain the state of undisturbedness does not render him blind to the epistemic standing of the opposing arguments he considers in his investigations.

In closing, let me remark that, if the skeptic decides to stop inquiring, he does not thereby stop suspending judgment. For to stop inquiring does not necessarily mean that the skeptic has made a positive or negative discovery about any of the matters he has investigated. It may just mean that he has lost interest in investigation. Suspension of judgment is thus compatible with both continuing the investigation and ceasing it. A person who has ceased to inquire may well maintain his suspensive state of mind regarding the question whether *p* as a result of his previous inquiry into whether *p*. We should bear in mind that the skeptic's engagement in ongoing inquiry is to be explained by both his second-order suspension of judgment and his inquisitive and curious temperament. His second-order suspension leaves open the possibility that the truth about the matters about which he suspends judgment might be found and, hence, explains the open-mindedness with which he carries out his inquiries, but what motivates him to keep investigating those matters is his inquisitive and curious temperament. Now, if the skeptic ceases to be engaged in inquiry, does this mean that he is no longer a skeptic? The reply depends on whether both suspension and involvement in ongoing inquiry are essential features of the skeptical philosophy. I am inclined to answer the question in the affirmative because Sextus tells us that the skeptic's continuing engagement in investigation is what distinguishes his stance from the other two main types of philosophy (*PH I 1–4*) and that 'investigative' is one of the appellations of the skeptical outlook (*PH I 7*).³² Hence, the association of the

³² Sextus's remarks that suspension is a state of mind that comes about in the skeptic after an investigation he has conducted (*PH I 7*) and that it results from the equipollence of the matters being investigated (*PH I 196*) do not seem relevant to the issue under consideration inasmuch as they refer to the investigation that has resulted in the state of suspension in which the skeptic finds himself at present, not to any future investigation the skeptic might undertake.

skeptical stance with the activity of inquiry or investigation referred to at the beginning of this article seems to be a fundamental one.³³

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