

Epistemology and Ethics in Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*: ἐποχή and ἀταραξία

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This study examines the relationship between epistemology and ethics in Sextus Empiricus' conception of Pyrrhonian Scepticism as presented in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Πυρρώνειοι ὑποτυπώσεις). It investigates whether Sextus' work should be understood primarily as a practical, ethical guide aimed at tranquillity (ἀταραξία), or as an epistemological strategy oriented toward suspension of judgement (ἐποχή) with respect to the scientific and philosophical beliefs of the dogmatists. Assessment (ἐπίκρισις), understood as a specific stage of dialectical assessment within the broader process of inquiry (ζήτησις), occupies a significant place in this account and is carried out through Pyrrhonian argumentative strategies, especially the Agrippan modes. The study suggests that, in Sextus' conception, epistemology and ethics are inseparable, and that the question whether Pyrrhonism should be understood primarily as an ethical or as an epistemological enterprise remains undecided.

Keywords: Pyrrhonian Scepticism – Sextus Empiricus – Agrippan modes – tranquillity (ἀταραξία) – suspension of judgement (ἐποχή) – assessment (ἐπίκρισις) – epistemology and ethics

Pyrrhonian Scepticism had a history of more than five hundred years in antiquity, and during this period it assumed several markedly different forms.

In this study, we draw primarily on the form of Scepticism presented by Sextus Empiricus in his most famous work, the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Πυρρώνειοι ὑποτυπώσεις, *Pyrrh. hyp.*), which is considered the principal source for our knowledge of Pyrrhonian Scepticism.

Over at least the last three decades, we have witnessed a remarkable renaissance of interest in Sextus Empiricus – and rightly so. Sextus is the only Sceptical author whose work has survived, and it continues to be discussed with interest both by contemporary epistemologists and by specialists in ancient philosophy.¹ However, contemporary scholars differ in their understanding of this later form of Pyrrhonian Scepticism (henceforth referred to as Sextus' conception of Pyrrhonian Scepticism). There is disagreement over whether the Sceptic doubts everything or may hold certain justified beliefs to which he adheres in everyday life.² A further point of contention concerns the interpretation of the basic theoretical notions of Pyrrhonian Scepticism, and whether Sextus' conception should be understood primarily as a practical (ethical) guide leading to tranquillity (ἀταραξία), or as an epistemological project aimed at the suspension of judgement (ἐποχή) with respect to the scientific and philosophical beliefs of the dogmatists.

This study examines the relationship between epistemology and ethics, specifically the question of whether, and if so to what extent, these two domains can be understood as forming a mutually complementary whole in Sextus' work. The aim of this study is to present assessment (ἐπίκρισις) as a significant component of Sextus' conception of Pyrrhonian Scepticism, and to show that, within this conception, ἐπίκρισις functions as a specific stage of dialectical assessment within the broader process of inquiry (ζήτησις), which leads to the suspension of judgement (ἐποχή) and subsequently to the attainment of the practical goal – tranquillity (ἀταραξία) – in matters grounded in the philosophical and scientific beliefs of the dogmatists.

I. The End (τέλος) of the Sceptical School

Right at the beginning of *Pyrrh. hyp.*, Sextus Empiricus carefully distinguishes three main philosophical schools according to their stance toward the

¹ Three works by Sextus Empiricus have survived: the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Πυρρώνειοι ὑποτυπώσεις, *Pyrrh. hyp.* I – III), *Against the Dogmatists* (Πρὸς τοὺς δογματικούς, *Adv. math.* VII – XI), and *Against the Mathematicians* (Πρὸς τοὺς μαθηματικούς, *Adv. math.* I – VI).

² Sextus uses the terms Sceptic, Pyrrhonian, and Pyrrhonian Sceptic interchangeably; we adopt the same usage.

possibility of discovering truth in matters investigated specifically in philosophy (the Dogmatic, the Academic, and the Sceptical):

The natural result of any investigation is that the investigators either discover the object of search or deny that it is discoverable and confess it to be inapprehensible or persist in their search. So, too, with regard to the objects investigated by philosophy (κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν ζητούμενων), this is probably why some have claimed to have discovered the truth, others have asserted that it cannot be apprehended, while others again go on inquiring. Those who believe they have discovered it are the ‘Dogmatists,’ specially so called – Aristotle, for example, and Epicurus and the Stoics and certain others; Cleitomachus and Carneades and other Academics treat it as inapprehensible: the Sceptics keep on searching (ζητοῦσι δὲ οἱ σκεπτικοί) (*Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 1 – 4).³

In a broader context, Sextus labels as dogmatists all those who deviate from Pyrrhonian Scepticism by formulating some conviction or dogma concerning philosophical matters, whether because they claim to have discovered the truth or because they have declared it to be unknowable. The Sceptics, by contrast, are portrayed as persistent inquirers who never cease their inquiry.

Ethical orientation is decisive for Hellenistic philosophy; its central concept is tranquillity (ἀταραξία), understood as a precondition for a flourishing life. Philosophy in this period focused on logic, physics, and above all ethics – Stoicism, Scepticism, and Epicureanism were schools of thought that sought freedom from disturbance and anxiety (ταραχή) and aimed at attaining tranquillity (ἀταραξία). The question of how this goal might be attained

³ All translations from the Greek are taken from Bury's *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (1933). His translation, the work of a classical philologist, is adopted here as the reference standard for its interpretative restraint and overall philological reliability. Minor revisions have been introduced only where greater terminological consistency in rendering the technical terms of Pyrrhonian Scepticism was required, or where a slight modification more closely reflects Sextus' original formulation. All such editorial adjustments are explicitly noted in the footnotes. Τοῖς ζητοῦσι τι πράγμα ἢ εὔρεσιν ἐπακολουθεῖν εἰκὸς ἢ ἄρνησιν εὐρέσεως καὶ ἀκαταληψίας ὁμολογίαν ἢ ἐπιμονὴν ζητήσεως. διόπερ ἴσως καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν ζητούμενων οἱ μὲν εὐρηκέναι τὸ ἀληθὲς ἔφασαν, οἱ δ' ἀπεφάναντο μὴ δυνατόν εἶναι τοῦτο καταληφθῆναι, οἱ δὲ ἔτι ζητοῦσιν. καὶ εὐρηκέναι μὲν δοκοῦσιν οἱ ἰδίως καλούμενοι δογματικοί, οἷον οἱ περὶ Ἀριστοτέλην καὶ Ἐπίκουρον καὶ τοὺς Στωικοὺς καὶ ἄλλοι τινές, ὡς δὲ περὶ ἀκαταλήπτων ἀπεφάναντο οἱ περὶ Κλειτόμαχον καὶ Καρνεάδην καὶ ἄλλοι Ἀκαδημαῖκοί, ζητοῦσι δὲ οἱ σκεπτικοί.

consistently shaped the character of philosophical disputes and played a fundamental role in the further development of thought within the individual Hellenistic schools.

In the opening paragraphs of *Pyrrh. hyp.*, Book I (I, 1 – 35), Sextus offers a general account of Pyrrhonian Scepticism and sets out its basic theoretical concepts; here he presents Pyrrhonism as a practical guide or handbook for the Sceptical way of life. He then devotes most of Book I to a detailed exposition of Aenesidemus' ten modes (I, 36 – 163; cf. *DL IX*, 79 – 88), followed by a brief presentation of the Agrippan modes (I, 164 – 169; cf. *DL IX*, 88 – 89). Books II and III then constitute an exclusively polemical part, directed against the dogmatic philosophers in the main branches of Hellenistic philosophy – logic, physics, and ethics. With respect to ethics, Sextus challenges the arguments of the dogmatic philosophers not only in Book III of the *Pyrrh. hyp.* (III, 168 – 279), but also in the concluding section of the work *Πρὸς τοὺς δογματικούς* (*Adv. math.* XI).

Sextus considered it important – and he states this twice in the *Pyrrh. hyp.* (I, 25 – 26; 30), in almost identical terms – to set out the end of the Sceptical school, which encompasses both the problems investigated in philosophy and science and the questions of everyday practical life: “We assert still that the Sceptic's End (τέλος) is quietude in respect of matters of opinion (κατὰ δόξαν ἀταραξίαν) and moderate feeling in respect of things unavoidable (ἐν τοῖς κατηναγκασμένοις μετριοπάθειαν)” (*Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 25 – 26).⁴

On the basis of Sextus' account of the Sceptical τέλος in *Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 25 – 26 and I, 30, with further reference to *Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 8, I, 12, and I, 27 – 29, the structure of Sextus' conception of Pyrrhonian Scepticism may be schematically expressed as follows⁵:

A. Philosophical Issues

ταραχή → ἀπορία → ζήτησις → ἐπικρίσις (δύναμις ἀντιθετική → Aenesidemian modes → the two Agrippan modes from disagreement and relativity → Agrippa's trilemma → ἰσοσθένεια) → ἐποχή → ἀταραξία (tranquillity in matters grounded in the philosophical and scientific beliefs of the dogmatists)

⁴ φαμέν δὲ ἄχρι νῦν τέλος εἶναι τοῦ σκεπτικοῦ τὴν ἐν τοῖς κατὰ δόξαν ἀταραξίαν καὶ ἐν τοῖς κατηναγκασμένοις μετριοπάθειαν.

⁵ For further discussion, see also Vasiliadis (2025).

B. Matters of Ordinary, Everyday Life

μετριοπάθεια (moderate feeling in respect of things unavoidable)

We will attempt to show that the division between philosophical questions and questions of everyday life, as well as the relation between the technical terms ἀταραξία and μετριοπάθεια, constitutes a mutually interrelated and inseparable methodological framework for Sextus' conception of Pyrrhonian Scepticism.

II. Philosophical Issues: ἀταραξία

First, we focus on the questions that belong to the domain of philosophical inquiry (κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν ζητουμένων), where the ultimate goal of the Sceptics is tranquillity (ἀταραξία). These are questions about which the dogmatists were convinced either that they had discovered the truth or, conversely, that it could not be discovered. In *Pyrrh. hyp.* these matters are formulated in several different ways: the objects investigated in philosophy (I, 2); the objects of dogmatic inquiry (I, 199 – 200); what is true in things and what false (I, 12); the non-evident objects of scientific inquiry (I, 13); any of the non-evident objects (I, 13 – 14; 16 – 17; 20); the objects based on dogmatic belief (I, 25; 30). The common thread linking these formulations is the figure of the dogmatist who, in his rashness, believes that he has found infallibly true answers to these very matters (cf. Vasiliadis 2025, 83).

The primary cause of Pyrrhonian Scepticism, according to Sextus, is the hope of attaining tranquillity (ἀταραξία). Sextus presents the way to reach this end in a narrative form: he tells a story in which exceptionally talented people become disturbed (ταραχή) by the contradictions in things; they fall into doubt (ἀπορία) as to which of them they ought to accept; and they proceed to inquire (ζήτησις) into what is true and what is false in things; so that by assessing (ἐπίκρισις) the question they might attain tranquillity (ἀταραξία) (*Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 12). Assessment (ἐπίκρισις), in the sense of deciding or settling a disputed issue, marks a significant moment in the above scheme. Within this scheme, ἐπίκρισις may be understood as a specific stage of dialectical assessment within the broader process of inquiry (ζήτησις), in which the dogmatists' claims to true knowledge are assessed by means of Sceptical argumentative strategies, especially the Agrippan modes. The result of this assessment, however, is not a decision in favour of one of the opposing arguments, but rather the recognition of their equipollence (ἰσοσθένεια), whereby the dispute is shown to be undecidable (ἀνεπίκριτος). This recognition leads to suspension of judgement (ἐποχή), from which tranquillity (ἀταραξία) follows.

In this sense, the Sceptic's inability to decide an equipollent dispute is not a failure of the Sceptical method. Rather, the Agrippan modes show that what fails is the dogmatic assumption that one of the opposing arguments in the dispute can be definitively established as indisputably true. To further clarify the role of assessment (ἐπίκρισις) within Sextus' conception of Pyrrhonian Scepticism, it is necessary first to introduce the set of five Agrippan modes: the first mode, deriving from disagreement (τὸν ἀπὸ τῆς διαφωνίας); the second mode, based on regress *ad infinitum* (τῆς εἰς ἄπειρον ἐκπτώσεως); the third mode, concerning relativity (τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ πρὸς τι); the fourth mode, from hypothesis (ἐξ ὑποθέσεως); and the fifth mode, that of reciprocity (διάλληλος). An account of these modes is given not only by Sextus but also by Diogenes Laertius (*Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 164 – 169; *DL IX*, 88 – 89).⁶ The argumentation scheme of the Agrippan modes, extensively used by Sextus, is still regarded as presenting a fundamental epistemic problem, commonly referred to as the problem of epistemic regress or the problem of the criterion of truth (e.g., Machuca 2015, 25; Lammenranta 2019, 570; Vázquez 2019, 51; Barnes 1990, ix; Floridi 2002, 9).

According to Sextus, the Sceptical ability (δύναμις ἀντιθετική) to oppose any argument with an equipollent counterargument (ἰσοσθένεια)⁷ constitutes an important component of ἐπίκρισις. The ten Aenesidemian modes facilitate a more precise orientation within such oppositions, and a similar role is fulfilled by the two Agrippan modes – the mode arising from disagreement (τὸν ἀπὸ τῆς διαφωνίας) and the mode of relativity (τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ πρὸς τι). The ten Aenesidemian modes and this pair of Agrippan modes complement each other within the process of assessment (ἐπίκρισις). Their task is to trigger a demand for justification of the argument under evaluation by revealing the existence of an incompatible and equally well-supported counterargument, thereby prompting suspension of judgement (ἐποχή) (cf. Fogelin 1994, 116). When it comes to arguments concerning an undecidable dispute (e.g., A₁ and A₂), the Sceptic suspends judgement on the basis of the mode arising from disagreement (τὸν ἀπὸ τῆς διαφωνίας); if the arguments are based on the relativity of a given matter, he suspends judgement in accordance with the mode of relativity (τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ πρὸς τι).

⁶ Virtually nothing is known about Agrippa's life; according to Diogenes Laertius, the five modes are attributed to Agrippa (*DL IX*, 88).

⁷ Sextus does not use the term ἰσοσθένεια in its general sense, but as a technical term in Pyrrhonian Scepticism, denoting the epistemic equality of opposing arguments insofar as neither is more convincing or better justified than the other (cf. *Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 10; I, 63; I, 76 – 78; I, 196 – 199; I, 202 – 204; I, 222 – 227; II, 51 – 55; II, 67).

At this stage, the situation is already clear for the Pyrrhonist: after careful assessment, he concludes that neither argument A_1 nor A_2 is any more or less credible, nor any more or less non-credible, than the other; and, given the Pyrrhonian equipollence (ἰσοσθένεια) of the competing arguments, he suspends judgement (ἐποχή) in every such case.

However, let us consider a situation in which a dogmatist is firmly convinced that he possesses a criterion of truth that enables him to justify the infallible truth of one of the arguments, such as A_1 . It is precisely this rashness and presumed infallibility on the part of the dogmatists that marks the moment at which the universal algorithm of the three modes – known in modern epistemology as Agrippa's trilemma (Hankinson 1995, 166; Fogelin 1994, 116; cf. Vasiliadis 2025, 79; Machuca 2015, 25; Lammenranta 2019, 569; Vázquez 2019, 51) – comes into play: the mode of regress *ad infinitum* (τῆς εἰς ἄπειρον ἐκπτώσεως), the mode of hypothesis (ἐξ ὑποθέσεως), and the mode of reciprocity (διάλληλος).

Agrippa's trilemma convincingly demonstrates that any attempt by dogmatists to justify argument A_1 is necessarily blocked by one of the three modes. A_1 is then subjected to the trilemma in the following way: argument A_1 is either (i) a mere assertion without proof; or its truth relies on a justification that leads to (ii) infinite regress; or it results in (iii) circularity. (i) Any attempt to posit a mere unjustified assumption is blocked by the hypothetical mode (ἐξ ὑποθέσεως), which leads to suspension of judgement (ἐποχή). (ii) If a dogmatist attempts to justify A_1 by introducing some new reason R_1 , then R_1 will in turn require further reasons R_2 , R_3 , R_4 , and so on *ad infinitum*; yet such a procedure is blocked by the mode of infinite regress (τῆς εἰς ἄπειρον ἐκπτώσεως), which likewise results in suspension of judgement (ἐποχή). (iii) The reciprocity mode (διάλληλος) applies when the dogmatist seeks to justify A_1 by appealing to some reason R_1 that is argumentatively identical to it – R_1 is supposed to confirm A_1 , while A_1 at the same time is supposed to confirm R_1 . Such circular justification is rejected by Agrippa's reciprocity mode, and here too the Sceptic arrives at suspension of judgement (ἐποχή) (esp. Vázquez 2019; cf. also Barnes 1990, 113 – 144; Machuca 2015; Hankinson 1995, 163 – 172; Fogelin 1994, 113 – 122; Lammenranta 2019).

Most scholars rightly point out that Agrippa's trilemma constitutes a fully universal algorithm that is entirely indifferent to the subject matter of the arguments under examination. Yet some of them infer from this consideration that the Sceptic suspends judgement in all matters and that his ongoing search

for truth cannot be taken seriously.⁸ It can be objected, however, that Agrippa's trilemma does not call into question the content of argument A₁ itself, but rather the self-assurance of the dogmatists who take It to be infallibly true – that is, the situation in which the dogmatist is convinced of its truth, whereas the Sceptic demands only one thing: its justification.

It is only the dogmatists' theories – theories that claim special insights, perfect universalizability, perfect certitude and sound guidance of action – it is only these challengers that need to show their credentials. And so the skeptic has no general interest in challenging beliefs, unless they are posited as dogmatic beliefs (Brennan 2015, 11).

Sextus explains that dogmatists differ from Pyrrhonists in that they assent (συγκατατίθεται) to certain non-evident matters that form the subject of scientific inquiry (*Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 13).

When we say that the Sceptic refrains from dogmatizing we do not use the term “dogma,” as some do, in the broader sense of “approval of a thing” (for the Sceptic gives assent to the feelings which are the necessary results of sense-impressions, and he would not, for example, say when feeling hot or cold “I believe that I am not hot or cold”); but we say that “he does not dogmatize” using “dogma” in the sense, which some give it, of “assent to one of the non-evident objects of scientific inquiry”; for the Pyrrhonian philosopher assents to nothing that is non-evident (*Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 13 – 14).⁹

The expression that deserves attention here is to assent to something (συγκατάθεσις).¹⁰ Sextus does not use συγκατάθεσις here in its ordinary

⁸ For detailed discussion, see Barnes (1982, 1990, 113 – 144); Machuca (2015, 2022, 81 – 103); Hankinson (1995, 163 – 172); cf. Vázquez (2019); Perin (2010, 3 – 4); Frede (1987, 179 – 200); Fogelin (1994, 113 – 122); Lammenranta (2019).

⁹ Λέγομεν δὲ μὴ δογματίζειν τὸν σκεπτικὸν οὐ κατ' ἐκεῖνο τὸ σημαινόμενον τοῦ δόγματος καθ' ὃ δόγμα εἶναι φασὶ τινες κοινότερον τὸ εὐδοκεῖν τινι πράγματι (τοῖς γὰρ κατὰ φαντασίαν κατηναγκασμένοις πάθει συγκατατίθεται ὁ σκεπτικός, οἷον οὐκ ἂν εἴποι θερμαινόμενος ἢ ψυχόμενος ὅτι δοκῶ μὴ θερμαίνεσθαι ἢ ψύχεσθαι), ἀλλὰ μὴ δογματίζειν λέγομεν καθ' ὃ δόγμα εἶναι φασὶ τινες τὴν τινι πράγματι τῶν κατὰ τὰς ἐπιστήμης ζητούμενων ἀδήλων συγκατάθεσιν· οὐδενὶ γὰρ τῶν ἀδήλων συγκατατίθεται ὁ Πυρρώνειος.

¹⁰ Strictly speaking, in Stoic epistemology assent (συγκατάθεσις) is not directed at the impression (φαντασία) itself, but at the meaning of a descriptive or prescriptive proposition derived from it. This qualification is important because Sextus' use of συγκατάθεσις in this context concerns assent in an epistemic sense, namely the dogmatic acceptance of something as true; for the Stoic theory of assent, see Kalaš (2002).

sense of assent, but as a technical term in an epistemic sense – an unqualified assent understood as the dogmatist’s conviction that the matter which is the subject of his dogmatizing is indeed true.¹¹ Any uncertainty in metaphysical or scientific matters is welcomed by the Pyrrhonists, for it is precisely such uncertainty – and the accompanying awareness of the limits and possibilities of knowledge, its instruments, and its criteria – that opens up genuine space for ongoing inquiry, as Sextus describes in the *Pyrrh. hyp.* (I, 1 – 4). In contrast, the dogmatists’ self-assurance and their absolute assent (συγκατάθεσις) in the epistemic sense constitute precisely the attitude to which the Sceptics respond by activating Agrippa’s trilemma – the most effective instrument in their arsenal – by which they demonstrate that the dogmatic philosopher, even with all his efforts, cannot adhere to his own rigorously fixed epistemic standards or reliably substantiate his beliefs in scientific and philosophical matters (cf. Frede 1987, 204). The activation of Agrippa’s trilemma is therefore not a consequence of the Sceptic’s attitude – it is entirely up to the dogmatist whether to persist in his high demands for epistemic certainty and justification or to retreat from them.

III. Matters of Ordinary, Everyday Life: μετριοπάθεια

Unlike the non-evident philosophical issues, questions of ordinary everyday life are not the object of Sceptical inquiry. The Pyrrhonist lives undogmatically, adhering in practical matters to appearances, which, according to Sextus, lie beyond any investigation (*Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 23; cf. 226; 237 – 238). Pyrrhonists maintain appearances (φαινόμενα) in force, since these are necessary for life and they themselves cannot remain entirely inactive; at the same time, however, they insist that an appearance, taken by itself, does not tell us anything true about the real nature of things. Sextus says in this context: “Consequently, no one, I suppose, disputes that the underlying object has this or that appearance; the point in dispute is whether the object is in reality such as it appears to be” (*Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 22).¹²

It is therefore sufficient to live an undogmatic ordinary life, in which the Sceptic also participates, in accordance with everyday experience, which

¹¹ For Sextus’ use of συγκατάθεσις as dogmatic assent, see *Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 7; I, 12 – 13; I, 16; I, 34; I, 190 – 193; I, 197; I, 222; II, 4; II, 49; II, 60 – 62; III, 187; III, 242. In Stoic philosophy, συγκατάθεσις denotes the assent of the mind to a cognitive impression (καταληπτικῇ φαντασίᾳ) taken as unquestionably true (Liddell and Scott 1996, s.v. συγκατάθεσις).

¹² διὸ περὶ μὲν τοῦ φαίνεσθαι τοῖον ἢ τοῖον τὸ ὑποκείμενον οὐδεὶς ἴσως ἀμφισβητήσει, περὶ δὲ τοῦ εἰ τοιοῦτον ἔστιν ὁποῖον φαίνεται ζητεῖται.

appears to consist of four parts: the first lies in nature's guidance, the second in the necessity of affections (ἀνάγκη παθῶν), the third in the tradition of laws and customs, and the fourth in instruction in craft and artistic skills. According to the first, we are capable of perceiving and thinking; according to the second, hunger leads us to eat and thirst to drink; the third concerns the tradition of laws and customs, whereby we regard piety as good and impiety as evil in ordinary life; and according to the fourth, we engage in learning craft and artistic skills, provided that we are not inactive in those. Sextus considered it important to add that all of this is understood non-dogmatically (*Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 23 – 24; 237 – 238). Sextus further emphasizes that, just as appearances do not disclose the true essence (οὐσία) of things, neither does any domain of ordinary experience reveal anything reliable about their real nature. The Sceptic lives an ordinary life in accordance with everyday experience, does not call appearances into question, but suspends judgement (ἐποχή) concerning what is dogmatically asserted about them (*Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 19 – 20).

According to Sextus, the source of all disturbance (ταραχή) lies in the dogmatist's assent (συγκατάθεσις) to the belief that certain things are by nature good or bad. When a person lacks what he takes to be naturally good, he not only strives to obtain it – often with great urgency – but also takes the very lack of it to be a natural evil. However, once he obtains it, he falls into even greater disturbance: on the one hand, because he becomes irrationally and immoderately elated, and on the other, because he lives in constant fear of losing what he considers good. Unlike the dogmatist, the Sceptic is not afflicted by disturbance (ταραχή); he neither eagerly avoids nor pursues anything but suspends judgement (ἐποχή) concerning what is supposed to be good or bad by nature, and thereby attains tranquillity (ἀταραξία).¹³ The Sceptic is not entirely exempt from difficulties; nevertheless, the Sceptical way of life is superior to that of the dogmatists. While dogmatists suffer thirst, hunger, cold, and similar hardships twice over – once through the affections themselves, and once again through the added belief that these conditions are by nature evil – the Sceptic bears such difficulties with greater moderation, since he rejects the assumption that any of them is evil by its very nature (φύσει κακῶν) (*Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 30).

¹³ See *Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 27 – 28; cf. also I, 24; III, 168 – 169; III, 177 – 178; III, 191 – 193; III, 200; III, 207 – 209; III, 225; III, 235; III, 239; III, 278; Adv. math. XI, 2 – 3; XI, 17 – 19. For contemporary discussion, see Brennan (2015); Machuca (2019); Маслов (2021).

For example, in matters of piety, Sextus' response concerns ordinary life, where reverence for the gods forms part of the established tradition of laws, customs, and upbringing. The Sceptic participates in the religious life of the community just as any ordinary person does, since such practice belongs to his sociocultural environment. He does so, however, not because he endorses any dogmatic claims about the existence or non-existence of the gods, about their real nature, or about how we ought to conduct ourselves toward them (cf. Bett 2019, 177).

IV. The Relation between ἐποχή and ἀταραξία in Sextus' Story of Apelles

The Sceptic is said to have had an experience similar to the one told in the story of a painter named Apelles. Apelles wished to depict the foam on a horse's mouth but repeatedly failed. Abandoning the attempt, he flung onto the painting the sponge with which he wiped his brushes; when the sponge struck the surface, it produced a perfect likeness of the horse's foam (*Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 28).

So, too, the Sceptics were in hopes of gaining quietude (ἀταραξία) by means of a decision (ἐπίκρισις) regarding the disparity of the objects of sense (φαινόμενα) and of thought (νοούμενα), and being unable to effect this they suspended judgement (ἐποχή); and they found that quietude (ἀταραξία), as if by chance, followed upon their suspense, even as a shadow follows its body (ὡς σκιά σώματι) (*Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 29).¹⁴

We cannot determine with certainty what the proper interpretation of this story should be. Apelles was striving to accomplish something he was initially convinced he was competent to achieve, yet he succeeded only when he abandoned confidence in his own ability to capture the horse's foam with truthful precision. Everything seems to suggest – and many scholars¹⁵ incline toward this interpretation – that the Sceptic attains his goal, tranquillity (ἀταραξία), not by discovering the truth, but, unexpectedly, only once when he relinquishes the search for it. However, such an interpretation would conflict with the Sceptic's continual engagement in inquiry, as Sextus describes

¹⁴ Bury's translation (1933) renders the Greek simile παρηκολούθησεν ὡς σκιά σώματι in the form as a shadow follows its substance. I substitute body for substance in order to reflect more literally the sense of σῶμα in this context.

καὶ οἱ σκεπτικοὶ οὖν ἡλπίζον μὲν τὴν ἀταραξίαν ἀναλήψεσθαι διὰ τοῦ τὴν ἀνωμαλίαν τῶν φαινομένων τε καὶ νοουμένων ἐπικρίναι, μὴ δυνηθέντες δὲ ποιῆσαι τοῦτο ἐπέσχον· ἐπισχοῦσι δὲ αὐτοῖς οἷον τυχικῶς ἡ ἀταραξία παρηκολούθησεν ὡς σκιά σώματι.

¹⁵ See, e.g., Striker (1996, 192 – 193); Byrd (2023, 3 – 4); Bett (2003, 109).

in the opening paragraph of the *Pyrrh. hyp.* In reality, it is precisely the dogmatists who have abandoned the search for truth – either because, in their rashness, they believe they have already found it, or because they have declared it unknowable. The Sceptics, unlike the dogmatists, neither claim to have discovered the truth nor assert that its cognition is impossible. As Perin rightly observes, the Sceptic does not abandon the search for truth; rather, being unable to discover it under the conditions at hand, he suspends judgement (ἐποχή) within the process of epistemic assessment (ἐπίκρισις). For when the Sceptic reports that he is unable to find the truth, he is not thereby making a dogmatic assertion that the truth is unknowable (Perin 2010, 17 – 18).

It is evident that the question of the relation between ἐποχή and ἀταραξία is of central importance for Sextus. He already points, several paragraphs earlier in the *Pyrrh. hyp.*, to the connection between suspension of judgement (ἐποχή) and the attainment of tranquillity (ἀταραξία) – a connection that constitutes the principal motif of the Apelles simile: “And how quietude (ἀταραξία) enters the soul along with suspension of judgement (ἐποχή) we shall explain in our chapter concerning the end” (*Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 10).¹⁶ Sextus’s account, according to which tranquillity (ἀταραξία) accompanies suspension of judgement (ἐποχή) as a shadow follows its body, indicates that this is not a mere matter of chance but a permanent correlation between ἀταραξία and ἐποχή. This correlation further suggests that we are dealing with a continually recurring process of inquiry rather than a state achieved once and for all. It is therefore important to clarify why Sextus, in the very same sentence, asserts that tranquillity (ἀταραξία) accompanies suspension of judgement (ἐποχή) only “as if by chance” (οἷον τυχικῶς, *Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 29), yet at the same time speaks of their inseparable connection, “as a shadow follows its body” (ὥς σκιά σώματι, *Pyrrh. hyp.* I, 29).

We have outlined the relation between ἀταραξία and ἐποχή. It is now appropriate to turn to suspension of judgement (ἐποχή) itself. Of central importance are the Sceptic’s capacity to oppose each argument with an equipollent counterargument and the Sceptical modes through which suspension of judgement is attained. Here, chance plays no role whatsoever: the Sceptic suspends judgement (ἐποχή) quite deliberately, because he cannot determine which of two incompatible arguments is more – or less – credible.

¹⁶ Bury’s edition (1933) inserts the editorial chapter number “(XII.),” which has no counterpart in the Greek text; I omit this element in order to reflect more closely Sextus’ original formulation. πῶς δὲ τῇ ἐποχῇ συνεισέρεχται ἡ ἀταραξία, ἐν τοῖς περὶ τέλους ὑπομνήσομεν.

Pyrrhonian ἐποχή does not concern the content of the arguments themselves, but exclusively their evidence or justification. The element of chance to which Sextus refers lies in the fact that the Sceptic does something he neither planned nor expected to contribute to his goal of attaining tranquillity (ἀταραξία) (cf. Perin 2010, 17). He had assumed that ἀταραξία could be achieved only by discovering the truth; yet, being unable to achieve his goal in that way, he instead engaged in something else – suspending judgement (ἐποχή) – without anticipating that this would lead to tranquillity. Unexpectedly, however, he found that he could attain peace of mind, and even do so repeatedly, without having to hastily determine which of the competing arguments is in fact true. The Pyrrhonist freed himself from anxiety and attained tranquillity once he realised that suspending judgement (ἐποχή) regarding the justification of the arguments under examination was not an obstacle but a precondition for further inquiry.

V. Conclusion

The Sceptic lives an everyday life, adhering in practical matters to appearances and following the laws, traditions, customs, and other sociocultural forms of life shared by most people. Yet it should not be overlooked that he is, above all, a persistent inquirer, and this is precisely what distinguishes him from others.

In contrast to the man on the street, the skeptic is acutely aware of the fact that in all sorts of ways things might, in reality, be quite different from how they appear to be. He takes the phenomena as they come, but he knows better than anyone else that nothing rules out the possibility that things could really be radically different (Frede 1987, 198).

A similar stance is taken by a large part of the scholarly community, often without ever having read Sextus Empiricus. Be that as it may, there are certainly many cases in which the hasty and insufficiently warranted acceptance of one among several opposing arguments as indisputably true has led to serious error. To minimise such errors, scientists often adopt – albeit unknowingly – the Pyrrhonian practice of suspending judgement (ἐποχή), thereby in effect opening the way for further inquiry.

In this study, we have focused on the relation between epistemology and ethics in Sextus' conception of Pyrrhonian Scepticism. Our analysis indicates that the practical goal of the Pyrrhonists – tranquillity (ἀταραξία) – is attainable only within the framework of epistemic assessment (ἐπίκρισις), understood here as a stage of dialectical assessment within the broader,

continually recurring process of inquiry. This process comprises several distinct stages: from the Sceptical ability (δύναμις ἀντιθετική) to oppose any argument with an equipollent (ἰσοσθένεια) counterargument, through Agrippa's trilemma, to the suspension of judgement (ἐποχή), from which tranquillity (ἀταραξία) follows as a natural consequence. We have not arrived at a single, uniquely correct answer to the question raised at the outset as to whether Pyrrhonism should be regarded primarily as an ethical or as an epistemological project. Such a question does not admit of a decisive resolution, and for this reason we suspend judgement (ἐποχή) on the matter. Nevertheless, Sextus' conception of Pyrrhonian Scepticism may be understood as a practical guide for orienting oneself within a world of numerous mutually conflicting claims and for avoiding unqualified dogmatic assent (συγκατάθεσις) to any belief grounded in insufficient evidence.

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