

Pyrrhonian neutrality: a mirage

Y. Sandy Berkovski

[forthcoming in *Studia Philosophica*]

Abstract

I begin by asking the familiar question whether Sextus holds everyday beliefs or instead, merely reports unwilled and clear feelings and appearances. Having argued that sensation reports and custom-statements fail to satisfy Pyrrhonian strictures, I then ask whether judgement suspension in a theoretical enquiry might not be the distinguishing feature of Pyrrhonism. I conclude that, since it can't be spelled out either as refraining, deferring, or agnosticism, judgement suspension is ultimately unsuitable to ground a distinctive epistemological approach.

Keywords: neutrality, scepticism, judgement, suspension, agnosticism, Pyrrhonism.

I

1. My goal here is to examine the nature of Pyrrhonian epistemic commitments. I begin in section I with the question of whether Sextus was an 'urbane' sceptic who maintained everyday beliefs, or a 'rustic' one who held no beliefs at all. On the face of it, Pyrrhonists embrace only what is apparent and unwilled, assenting only to immediate mental states. But it is rather difficult to distinguish acceptable statements based on the clarity of appearances, since such clear statements, if they exist at all, fail to guide us (and the sceptic) in practical life. Perhaps, therefore, the feature distinguishing Pyrrhonism from dogmatism is 'judgement suspension'. Thus in section II I consider various possibilities of explicating this notion, such as refraining from judgment, deferring judgment, and agnosticism. I ultimately conclude that none of them is a plausible candidate for Pyrrhonian suspension.

2. There is a debate in the recent scholarship about the nature and extent of Pyrrhonian epistemic commitments, at least as they are presented by Sextus. For the ease of reference, here are some key passages from Sextus:¹

- (1) A. The Sceptical persuasion is also called Investigative, from its activity in investigating and inquiring; Suspensive, from the feeling that comes about in the inquirer after the investigation. (*Pyr.* I 7)
- B. We use 'I suspend judgement' for 'I cannot say which of the things proposed I should find convincing and which I should not find convincing', making clear that objects appear to us equal in respect of convincingness and lack of convincingness. Whether they are equal, we do not affirm: we say what appears to us about them, when they make an impression on us. Suspension of judgement gets its name from the fact that the intellect is suspended so as neither to posit nor to reject anything because of the equipollence of the matters being investigated. (*Pyr.* I 196)
- C. When we say that Sceptics do not hold beliefs, we do not take 'belief' in the sense in which some say, quite generally, that belief is acquiescing in something; for Sceptics assent to the feelings forced upon them by appearances—for example, they would not say, when heated or chilled, 'I think I am not heated (or: chilled)'. Rather, we say that they do not hold beliefs in the sense in which some say that belief is assent to some unclear object of investigation in the sciences; for Pyrrhonists do not assent to anything unclear. (*Pyr.* I 13)

¹ I quote *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* according to Annas and Barnes (2000), and *Against the Mathematicians* according to Bett (2005).

- D. The standard of the Sceptical persuasion is what is apparent, i.e. the appearances; for they depend on passive and unwilling feelings and are not objects of investigation. Thus, attending to what is apparent, we live in accordance with everyday observances, without holding opinions. By the handing down of customs and laws, we accept, from an everyday point of view, that piety is good and impiety bad. (*Pyr.* I 22, 23, 24)
- E. Some objects are believed to be clear and others unclear. The clear ones are those that are grasped through no will of our own, by appearance and by means of an effect on us, such as (right now) “It is day” and “This is a human being” and everything like that, while the unclear ones are those that are not like this. What is clear and plain is clear and plain in every way, and is agreed to by everyone and allows for no dissension; what is unclear, on the other hand, is a matter of disagreement and is of a nature to fall into dissension. (*Math.* VIII 316, 322)

On one interpretation, Sextus (=a Sextan Pyrrhonist) is an ‘urbane’ sceptic (Frede, 1987). While he suspends judgement in a theoretical enquiry, he maintains his everyday beliefs. It appears to you that you are chilled (1C). So you believe that you are chilled. It appears to you that here is a wall. So you believe that here is a wall. This extends further than information gathered from sensory modalities, reaching all the way to ‘customs and laws’ (1D).² It appears to you (or: you feel) that you are afraid to die. So I believe that you are afraid to die. Incest strikes you as wrong. So you believe that incest is wrong. All of these beliefs enable you to function in daily life (1D).

But this reading of Sextus, for it to be defensible, must begin with isolating that privileged area of discourse where beliefs are permitted to the Pyrrhonist. We need, that is, some way of ‘insulating’ the theoretical from the everyday. But there is no reason to expect the Pyrrhonist to maintain that kind of insulation (Burnyeat, 2012c). On another interpretation, therefore, Sextus is a ‘rustic’ sceptic who holds no beliefs whatever. As a rustic sceptic, you may indeed be found saying, ‘I am afraid to die.’ But this doesn’t reflect your beliefs. Instead, you are merely reporting your feelings, sensations, thoughts crossing your mind, what have you (1B). What masquerades as assertions and vehicles of belief are in reality ‘avowals’, mere verbal expressions, perhaps ‘confessions’, of what is going on with you (Barnes, 2014).

One way to conduct this debate is to ask baldly whether the sceptic holds, or is entitled to hold, any beliefs. The philological aspects of this question aside, philosophically there is a danger of arguing over terminology (Striker, 2022:184). When you see a tree, do you thereby form a belief like, ‘There is a tree in front of me’, or do you merely have a ‘non-doxastic’ appearance of a tree that may or may not be aligned with your belief that there is a tree there?³ When you see a TV weatherman saying, ‘It’s snowing in Meribel’, do you thereby have a belief that it’s snowing in Meribel, or do you just have a non-doxastic appearance of snowing there? Can a non-doxastic *appearance* be so transmitted by testimony at all?

It is impossible, from a modern vantage point anyway, to have a meaningful discussion of these issues without going into the nature of perception, of ‘seeing’ and its interaction with theoretical beliefs, of mental contents, and so on, and so forth. The ancient sceptic, certainly Sextus himself, has little to nothing to say on these matters. It would be anachronistic, worse, circular, to commit him to any particular position in a highly specialised modern debate.

3. I think, therefore, it may be more rewarding to proceed bottom-up, so to speak, and imagine sceptical reactions in a number of particular situations. Thus consider the following list of statements (Barnes, 2014:428f):

² Sextan appearances summarised: Burnyeat (2012a:216), Perin (2010:33n2).

³ Non-doxastic appearances: Fine (2021:267), Frede (1987:187), Burnyeat (2012a:228).

- (2) a. It looks as though there is a rectangular tower. (*De dicto* look-statement)⁴
- b. The tower is rectangular. (Tower-statement)
- c. The Zytglogge is in Bern. (Custom-statement)
- d. The Zytglogge is composed of atoms. (Theoretical statement)

(2a) is meant to be a sensation report. A rustic sceptic is expected to decline to assert this statement or offer it up for a discussion. He is merely doing his best to put into words what's crossing his mind. And what's crossing his mind must be clear (1E). Well, is it? Is the tower wholly rectangular, or just some part of it? Is it perfectly rectangular? Is it a tower in the first place? Very soon, we are in a dogmatic debate to be evaded by the sceptic.

The *de dicto* qualifier 'it looks as though' is designed to take care of all of this, but it's not helping. Questions may be raised about what the 'lookings' and the 'seemings' in fact are. Suppose I challenge you, 'Are you sure/is it clear to you that the tower-appearance you mentioned a moment ago had a rectangular appearance?' Your reply must be based on your memory of the sensation you experienced, and you *qua* sceptic haven't given me a reason to think that your memory records anything clearly. Or suppose I ask, 'Is the cathedral to the left of the tower?' You might say, 'It looks as though it is to the right.' But when either of them is out of view, we can no longer talk about 'clear' appearances. Even at a very pre-theoretic level, when you recollect where the cathedral is, your recollection is anything but clear.

Next consider (2b). It is a claim about how things are, not mere seemings. If the sceptic utters it, he will face the same kind of questions we have been asking a moment ago: how clear is it that the *tower* is there, that it (or whatever it may be) is rectangular, or indeed, that anything at all is there.

But (2b) is essential to the Sextan sceptic's enterprise. It is what constitutes everyday observations. Unless the sceptic can find a way to endorse the naive realism of (2b), he can't find his way back to the common sense and have the ability to lead his life practically.

The same goes for (2c). How, for instance, can we plan our routines in Switzerland without statements like (2c)?⁵ Now the sceptic would likely endorse (2c), if indeed he would, based on an appeal to 'laws and customs'. There are two issues here. No universal acceptance can be guaranteed for these familiar statements (many may be unaware where the Zytglogge is located or think that it is in Zurich). Second, there is no standard of clarity and certainty we can apply to custom-statements that would be the same as the standard applied to sensation-statements. The very different ways in which we acquire custom-beliefs (or: assent to custom-statements) and sensation-beliefs, and the very different circumstances where we are called to use these beliefs, ensure that the two classes of statements shouldn't enjoy the same epistemic status. Incidentally, we observe the same tension in Moore (1959). It is not clear in that paper whether we should accept common sense propositions because of their relation to immediate perception ('Here is a pencil', 'Here is a hand') or rather because everyone accepts them and no one can *genuinely, seriously* think of challenging them ('The earth had existed for many years before my body was born', 'Many human bodies other than mine have before now lived on the earth').

So if (2a) is the only kind of statement that could represent 'clear appearances', then we might wish to drop the idea that statements acceptable to the sceptic are distinguished in terms of their content and turn instead to the way in which we come to assent to them. That's the proposal in Morison (2011). Put in terms of beliefs, the idea is that the acquisition of some of our beliefs is non-inferential. Custom-statements, and corresponding custom-beliefs, don't

⁴ There is also a *de re* look-statement, 'The tower looks rectangular' which is a mixture of the statements of the kind (2a) and (2b). As it inherits the problems of both of them, there is no need to examine it separately.

⁵ Everyday plans: Fogelin (1994:9).

have any special clarity of content, but they have something else: we accept them not because of a series of inferences, but directly through ‘acculturation’. You accept the statement, ‘Incest is wrong’ not because of some complicated theory of incest and its effects on human life, but simply as a given, ‘non-inferentially’, as Morison puts it. The same presumably should be said of tower-statements. In effect, they will be assimilated to look-statements.

But this ploy too doesn’t get the sceptic very far. Perhaps the very general custom-statements like ‘God exists’ (Frede’s example), ‘Piety is good’ (1D), or ‘Incest is wrong’ can be, and are, accepted non-inferentially. There are beside them other, more specific questions to be dealt with (‘Should *Epistle to the Romans* be taken literally?’, ‘Am I permitted to marry my cousin?’) that cannot be gathered through bare acculturation. The sceptic, that is, cannot navigate the world of custom by confining himself only to non-inferentially obtained statements. And navigating it successfully is clearly his central objective.

The difficulties with tower-statements are essentially the same, but should be teased out a bit differently. Suppose you *do* accept (2b) non-inferentially. Let us not ask yet how this became possible. Consider instead another statement like, ‘The tower was built in the 18th century.’ What would it take for you to ‘accept it non-inferentially’? Probably something as follows: you read it in a book, take it for granted, and move on. That’s all very well, but what if another book states that the tower was built in the 13th century? Plainly you can’t just accept *this* belief, jettison the earlier belief, and move on. Beliefs must have some *authority* over you, at least provisionally: you don’t give them up merely on the basis of how early or how late you acquired them. So you also can’t dismiss what the second book says merely because you read it later. Or in any event, if you do, that is no way to lead your life, since there is no reason to expect that beliefs will serve you best depending on the time of their acquisition.

Thus the fact that a certain belief is acquired non-inferentially is just a coincidence endowing that belief with no special privilege. The sceptic positioning himself as a practical, commonsensical man must be ready to deploy inferential reasoning and replace, if necessary, non-inferentially acquired beliefs with inferentially acquired ones.

One might revise Morison’s suggestion and attribute to clear appearances non-inferential *justification*, rather than acquisition. It looks to you as if there is a rectangular tower not because of some inference, but simply because, well, it looks that way. However you acquired the corresponding belief, you decline to justify it by appealing to some inference. Moreover, the tower *is* rectangular, again, merely because it looks rectangular. Some things look to the sceptic a certain way, strike him as being a certain way, and when they do, that’s his ‘immediate’, non-inferential reason to accept them as such. In contrast, the tower does not *look* as being built in the 18th century. If you believe that it does, you justify it by assembling together various experiential facts and your general knowledge to produce an inference to that effect.

One objection to this idea is the same as before: custom-statements, for them to be of any use to you in daily life, are not likely to be justified non-inferentially. The other worry is this. That you justify your belief that the tower was built in the 18th century by invoking an inference might simply reflect your own limitations. An architecture expert accepts it non-inferentially: he just *sees* the tower as built in the 18th century, quite the same way you see it as rectangular. There is, of course, no mystery how the architecture expert came to ‘see’ it that way: through education, training etc. This suggests, however, that your own non-inferential acceptance of (2b) is also a not very exciting consequence of repeated exposure to rectangular objects and to towers. There is, in other words, no reason for the sceptic to accord an exalted epistemic status to non-inferentially justified beliefs, since that would simply mean to celebrate some contingent facts of his own biography.⁶

⁶ Non-inferential justification has been explored in the modern discussion of dogmatism (Pryor, 2000). My

II

4. The current upshot is that the Sextan manoeuvres with clarity, appearances, and everyday observances have come to nought. Now the Pyrrhonist might drop any scruples about clarity and only insist on judgement suspension in *theoretical* matters (I will sometimes abbreviate it simply as ‘suspension’). This assumes the possibility of ‘insulation’ mentioned earlier. But whatever problems we may encounter with defending insulation, they seem to be smaller than the problems we find in squaring clarity and practical life. Not coincidentally, this in fact is the strategy also favoured by modern Pyrrhonism (Fogelin, 1994; 2004).

Thus we finally come to (2d) that is an ideal candidate, if anything is, for the kind of statement the sceptic is supposed to be wary of. It is part of a theory, and there is nothing in it having to do with appearances.⁷ There is trouble though. Following ‘customs and laws’ is very much part of the practical precept of scepticism. The reason they count as appearances is presumably the universal agreement they command. But now, (2d) commands no less, likely more, agreement than a custom like, ‘Incest is wrong’ or some article of the penal code. The Sextan sceptic can reply that unclear beliefs have been clarified. This, he might say, is a difference between Sceptics and Cyrenaics.⁸ The latter deny that external objects may be known in principle. The Sceptics continue to ‘investigate and enquire’ (1A above), and the goal of their investigation, we surmise, is not just to quarrel with Dogmatists. It is to achieve clarity which is what was done with the atomistic theory.⁹

On this view, the Sextan sceptic becomes a philosopher and critic of science, generally of any intellectual enterprise, in the phenomenalist and verificationist mould. Surveying dogmatic science with a baleful eye, he purports to expunge various ‘unclear’ assumptions, especially those remote from ‘appearances’ (later to evolve into ‘facts of experience’, ‘sense-data’, ‘protocol sentences’).¹⁰

But things aren’t that simple. In the first place, once you are *inside* the theoretical debate in physics, it may be clear to you that towers and cabbages are made of atoms: ‘It is as clear as day’, you say, ‘certainly clearer than the wrongness of incest and the shape of that tower to the left.’¹¹ Yet the entrance fee is high. Before you get to the point where you may think that anything like (2d) is clear, you have to swallow a lot of dogmatic beliefs. You don’t, indeed, have to commit yourself to what the putatively dogmatic physicists are saying. You may just play along and accept the physicists’ pronouncements ‘for the sake of argument’. But on the very long way to your goal of clarity you will be transformed, outwardly and for all intents and purposes, into a dogmatising physicist. Well, you say, that’s like being a secret spy. Outwardly, I am a dogmatist. Unlike a dogmatist, I *am* pursuing the goal of clarity.

misgivings about it are based on taking seriously Pryor’s own Honda example and the objections from theory-ladenness, more seriously than he does (536ff).

⁷ That, indeed, was the source of Mach’s opposition to the atomic theory: Mach (1911:57).

⁸ Cyrenaics vs. Sceptics: O’Keefe (2011:32ff), Tsouna (1998:75ff).

⁹ That’s the view taken in Vogt (2012:40ff).

¹⁰ See Mach (1893:216ff) for a sample of this procedure.

¹¹ Compare:

If, in some cataclysm, all of scientific knowledge were to be destroyed, and only one sentence passed on to the next generations of creatures, what statement would contain the most information in the fewest words? I believe it is the atomic hypothesis that all things are made of atoms. (Feynman et al., 2010:1-3)

Conceivably, Feynman takes the atomic hypothesis to stand on its own and be sufficiently clear to the future ‘creatures’.

5. If the sceptic injects himself into the dogmatic theoretical enquiry, then to set himself apart from the dogmatist he must do more than merely declare clarity to be his goal. Such a declaration is cheap, and the dogmatist too can will to achieve it in the distant future. Pyrrhonism is an epistemological doctrine, and there is one obvious way to distinguish it from dogmatism—namely, judgement suspension (*epochē*). However he deals with the common sense and custom statements, the Pyrrhonist, though not the dogmatist, suspends judgement in the case of a statement like (2d). The practical role of judgement suspension is equally central. It is required to guarantee, or even to make plausible, the sceptic’s prudential goal of tranquility. I will now argue that this Pyrrhonian attitude is bound for extinction.

Let’s first think of enquiry as a conversation centred around questions-under-discussion (QUDs) that may be overt or implicit.¹² Thus, e.g., the utterances (2) were not made out of the blue, in a void. They were part of the ongoing conversation that earlier should have included the explicitly posed or presupposed questions such as, ‘What do you see?’, ‘What kind of thing the Zytglogge is?’ and so on. Let *M* be one such QUD.

Then, echoing McGrath (2021), let’s say:

- (3) At *t*, *S* refrains from a judgement on *M*.
 = At *t*, *S* intentionally omits forming a judgement on *M*.

Refraining is an occurrent mental act, sometimes to be performed with difficulty.¹³ To say that you are refraining from judgement is not to say much at all: it is merely to register a psychological event at *t*. Suppose I ask you whether higher interest rates reduce inflation, and you tell me that you ‘refrain’ from judging on this matter. Pressed further as to why, you reply:

- (4) a. Because I am tired.
 b. Because I am busy.
 c. Because I don’t know what ‘inflation’ means.
 d. Because I need to consult the experts.

The epistemological issue is exactly why you are so refraining, and only some of your answers in (4) are epistemologically consequential.

It is useful, therefore, to see refraining as an ingredient of a more complex attitude at *t*. You can, for example, refrain from judging *M*, because, first, you think that currently, you have no good reasons for it, and second, you expect or hope that they will obtain in the future. It is felicitous to say about such cases that you ‘defer’ your judgement at *t*. But for your deferring to be part of a future-oriented *action*, you must defer judgement as part of a plan to determine the truth value of *P*. This may be a personal plan: ‘I’ve no idea what the dogs are up to, but we’ll soon find out.’ Or it may be a plan by proxy: ‘I’ve no idea, nor does any one else, how to cure Alzheimer. But we’ll know hopefully in twenty years (when science progresses etc.).’ There is or soon will be, in other words, some kind of enquiry that you now believe will provide (or would have provided) you with reasons to have an opinion on *M*. Hence:

- (5) At *t*, *S* defers judgement on *M*.¹⁴
 = At *t*, *S* temporarily delays forming a judgement on *M* before the appropriate epistemic conditions obtain at $t' > t$.
 = At *t*, *S* refrains from a judgement on *M*, because he believes that: at *t* there are no appropriate conditions to form such a judgement, and at $t' > t$ these conditions will obtain.

¹² QUDs: Beaver et al. (2017:267–269).

¹³ Difficulties of refraining/suspension: Meylan (2024:260).

¹⁴ ‘Deferring’ in (5) is ‘suspending’ in McGrath (2021) where this idiom is also used.

When you defer judgement, you go beyond the reactions in (4a) or (4b). You also mean that you are committed, to some extent anyway, to giving *M* another look. There are several reasons why, I think, Pyrrhonian suspension can't be explicated as deferment.¹⁵ When you defer your judgement on *M* at *t*, you expect, perhaps even hope, to form it later at *t'*. But if that's the sceptic's attitude, then he's only contingently a sceptic. For all he knows, one moment later he will form his judgement and abandon his *epochē*.

I suppose this argument should turn on our understanding of the 'investigative' character of Pyrrhonism. Lately we have represented the Pyrrhonist as a full-blown participant in the enquiry into *M*, perhaps even the dogmatist's colleague, that is striving for clarity in good faith. This may have been too rash. Perhaps the sceptic's investigative commitment doesn't go beyond the willingness to engage with the dogmatist. This weaker commitment must be combined with a general philosophical claim that the dogmatist's enquiry is futile. Unless some such claim is made, it is impossible to distinguish the sceptic from an epistemically vigilant dogmatist.

By the same token, the sceptic's desired tranquility should be elusive. By assumption, you won't get it at *t'* if you do form the judgement then. But even at the times between *t* and *t'* your epistemic activity is hardly distinguishable from the dogmatist's when you are busy evaluating your epistemic situation and stand ready to form the judgement.

6. There is a further situation where you simply refuse to engage with the given QUD. An example might be *M* = 'What is the first note of Berg's piano sonata?' Not that you don't understand what the issue is about, or the kind of answer the question may receive. Not that you don't believe that a relevant enquiry has been, is, or will be conducted, or that such an enquiry is dubious in principle. You just don't care one way or another. McGrath (2021:468, 473) suggests the following formula (I put it in our present terms):

- (6) At *t*, *S* doesn't care about *M*.
 = At *t*, *S* refrains from a judgement on *M*, because he believes that: for every *t'*, *S* (he) doesn't have a reason to ponder *M* and form a judgement on an *M*-related *P* (perhaps an answer to the explicit QUD *M*).

This can't be the Pyrrhonian suspension, either. Since, as per (1A), the sceptic's attitude remains 'investigative', he cannot bluntly announce his refusal to ponder *M* in the future. This is so both on the weak and strong senses of 'investigative' isolated earlier. The attitude explicated in (6) is itself dogmatic.

But (6) is anyway not a very natural spin on the 'don't care' idiom. I may have no reason to ponder some complex issue like the proper way to compose symphonies, whether because I don't have sufficient education for that (and I don't expect to gain it in the future), or because there are many other things to do, and time is short. But it doesn't follow that I don't *care* about it. This other sense of 'don't care' is captured, e.g., in an episode in Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory*:

- (7) First soldier: Most of us are more afraid of getting hurt than of getting killed. If you're afraid of dying, you'd spend your life in a funk because you know you've got to go someday. And if it's death you're afraid of, why should you care about what kills you?

Second soldier: You're too smart for me, professor. All I know is, nobody wants to die.

¹⁵ Here I disagree with McGrath (2021:468).

Here, M = ‘Is it rational to fear death?’ The First soldier conversationally implicates P = ‘There is no rational reason to fear death.’ The Second soldier understands the implicature and refrains from judging M , that is, declines to provide his own answer to the QUD. Instead he asserts Q = ‘Everybody fears death’ which is no answer to the QUD. Of course, this is not a bare failure to give an answer. It is a deliberate refusal to engage with M . Again, there is no indication that the Second soldier considers M and possible answers to it meaningless, undecidable, or otherwise defective. The ironic first sentence of his utterance is supposed to convey that the Second soldier puts no *value* in finding an answer, even supposing that an answer can be found. Indifference so understood is both an epistemic and a prudential attitude linking M to the speaker’s welfare. One way to spell it out may be this:

(8) At t , S is *indifferent* to M .

= At t , S refrains from a judgement on M , because he believes that: for every t' , if P is an answer to M , neither believing P , nor believing $\sim P$ has any effect on S ’s welfare at t' .

Now the Pyrrhonian sceptic certainly thinks that dogmatic enquiry is bad for your welfare, and that correspondingly, the sceptical dismissal of that enquiry is good for it. But that’s not the reason why he suspends judgement in a dogmatic enquiry. It’s not why he refrains from answering the putatively dogmatic QUD like, ‘What is the ultimate material composition of the Zytg-logge?’ To think that he does is to saddle him with a silly *petitio principii*. Rather, judgement suspension is a proper epistemic response to the dogmatic QUD, and its salient *effect*, namely tranquility, is good for you.¹⁶ The Pyrrhonist does not mean to explain judgement suspension by reference to tranquility. The reason is simple: it is not a conceptual truth that judgement suspension leads to tranquility. We need first to verify that we are addressing a dogmatic QUD in order for us to argue *then* that attempts to form judgements in response to that QUD will be detrimental to tranquility and thus to welfare. We can, therefore, safely assume that indifference to M is not the Pyrrhonian suspension.

7. Consider, finally, another notion explored in McGrath (2021:471) that is *not* the case of refraining:

(9) At t , S is *agnostic* wrt M .

= At t , S doesn’t have good reasons to believe an M -relevant P (perhaps an answer to the question M) and doesn’t have good reasons to believe $\sim P$.

Here’s McGrath’s example of agnosticism: before I flip a coin, I am agnostic about M = ‘How will the coin land?’ I am not confident enough to believe either that it will come up tails (P) or heads ($\sim P$). Why does agnosticism not include refraining? Because the ‘agnostic’ S does pass a judgement on P , namely, that he has 50% confidence (to follow McGrath’s informal terminology) that P is true. S is not prepared to believe P with this degree of confidence, but not because he expects to be in a better epistemic situation later on.

Another example may be as follows.¹⁷ Let M = ‘What did Socrates actually say before drinking his poison?’ You have some evidence from *Phaedo* that the answer is P = ‘Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius etc.’ But you also know that *Phaedo* is not a documentary record. So you don’t have sufficient confidence to believe P . But neither do you have the confidence to believe $\sim P$: no other sources even pretending to give an answer to M have survived. On the other hand, since you don’t expect to obtain any new evidence in the future, you are not deferring your judgement on M , either.

¹⁶ The logical connection between *epochē* and tranquility: Burnyeat (2012a:223f).

¹⁷ Compare the discussion of epistemic worsening in McGrath (2021:473).

There is no reason why a dogmatist can't be agnostic with respect to some QUDs. He may wish to be circumspect about Socrates' last words and Plato's fidelity as a source. He may be rational enough about not committing himself to tails or heads before the coin is flipped. Therefore, for the Pyrrhonian stance not to be trivial, the sceptic should be agnostic on *every* occasion where a theoretical question comes up.

But the real question is: could the agnostic attitude count as a suspension of judgement? Well, the Pyrrhonist idea seems to be that in suspending judgement (or belief) I am not to be understood as forming another judgement. For else I have failed to contrast myself with the dogmatist, and there is anyway no reason to celebrate the fact of suspension. McGrath (2021:474) gives a general argument to the same effect. Agnosticism is like belief in that I justify it by distinctively epistemic considerations. For example, I am agnostic about Socrates' last words, because of the decay of evidence, i.e. because of the specific features of my epistemic state, present or future. That's not so for various cases of refraining considered earlier, since my attitudes are determined there by my personal plans and preferences.¹⁸

8. I conclude that when examined closely, the Pyrrhonian suspension of judgement, if coherent at all, is not sufficient for grounding a distinctive epistemological approach. At best it should be viewed as a supplementary method, a kind of recommendation, for conducting a familiar, traditional 'dogmatic' enquiry.

References

- Annas, J. and Barnes, J., editors (2000). *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, second edition.
- Barnes, J. (2014). Pyrrhonism, belief, and causation. In *Proof, Knowledge, and Scepticism*. Clarendon Press, Oxford. Edited by M. Bonelli.
- Beaver, D. I., Roberts, C., Simons, M., and Tonhauser, J. (2017). Questions Under Discussion. *Annual Review of Linguistics*, 3(1):265–284.
- Bett, R., editor (2005). *Sextus Empiricus: Against the Logicians*. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Burnyeat, M. F. (2012a). Can the sceptic live his scepticism? In Burnyeat (2012b).
- Burnyeat, M. F. (2012b). *Explorations in Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, volume 1. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Burnyeat, M. F. (2012c). The sceptic in his place and time. In Burnyeat (2012b).
- Feynman, R. P., Leighton, R. B., and Sands, M. (2010). *The Feynman Lectures On Physics*, volume 1. Basic Books, New York. New Millennium Edition.
- Fine, G. (2021). *Skeptical dogmata*. In *Essays in Ancient Epistemology*. Oxford University Press, New York.

¹⁸ You may have doubts whether the formula (9) picks out a *sui generis* coherent attitude. You may suspect, e.g., that some putative cases of agnosticism are really cases of refraining, while its other cases are really cases of belief in disguise. I'm sympathetic to these doubts, but I won't pursue them here.

- Fogelin, R. J. (1994). *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Fogelin, R. J. (2004). The skeptics are coming! the skeptics are coming! In Sinnott-Armstrong, W., editor, *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Frede, M. (1987). The skeptic's beliefs. In *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN.
- Mach, E. (1893). *The Science of Mechanics*. Open Court, Chicago. Translated by T. J. McCormack.
- Mach, E. (1911). *History and Root of the Principle of the Conservation of Energy*. Open Court, Chicago. Translated by P. E. B. Jourdain.
- McGrath, M. (2021). Being neutral. *Noûs*, 55(2):463–484.
- Meylan, A. (2024). What do we do when we suspend judgement? *Philosophical Issues*, 34(1):253–270.
- Moore, G. E. (1959). A defence of common sense. In *Philosophical Papers*. George Allen & Unwin, London.
- Morison, B. (2011). The logical structure of the sceptic's opposition. In Allen, J., Emils-son, E. K., Mann, W.-R., and Morison, B., editors, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, volume XL. Oxford University Press, New York.
- O'Keefe, T. (2011). The Cyrenaics vs. the Pyrrhonists on knowledge of appearances. In Machuca, D. E., editor, *New Essays on Ancient Pyrrhonism*. Brill, Leiden.
- Perin, C. (2010). *The Demands of Reason*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Pryor, J. (2000). The skeptic and the dogmatist. *Noûs*, 34(4):517–549.
- Striker, G. (2022). Scepticism as a kind of philosophy. In *From Aristotle to Cicero*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Tsouana, V. (1998). *The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Vogt, K. M. (2012). The aims of skeptical investigation. In Machuca, D. E., editor, *Pyrrhonism in Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary Philosophy*. Springer, Dordrecht.