

## AGRIPPAN PYRRHONISM AND THE CHALLENGE OF DISAGREEMENT

DIEGO E. MACHUCA

CONICET

**ABSTRACT:** This paper argues for the following three claims. First, the Agrippan mode from disagreement does not play a secondary role in inducing suspension of judgment. Second, the Pyrrhonist is not committed to the criteria of justification underlying the Five Modes of Agrippa, which nonetheless does not prevent him from non-doxastically assenting to them. And third, some recent objections to Agrippan Pyrrhonism raised by analytic epistemologists and experimental philosophers fail to appreciate the Pyrrhonist's *ad hominem* style of argumentation and the real challenge posed by the mode from disagreement.

### I. INTRODUCTION

THE subject of this essay is the set of arguments known as the Five Modes of Agrippa, which are the most powerful weapons of the Pyrrhonian argumentative arsenal found in Sextus Empiricus's extant works. My purpose is to offer an interpretation both of certain aspects of the challenge posed by these modes and of the Pyrrhonist's attitude towards them. More precisely, I propose to show: (i) that the mode from disagreement does not play a secondary role in inducing suspension of judgment; (ii) that the Pyrrhonist is not committed to the criteria of justification underlying the Agrippan modes, which nonetheless does not prevent him from assenting to them in a weak, non-doxastic way; and (iii) that some recent objections to Agrippan Pyrrhonism raised by analytic epistemologists and experimental philosophers fail to appreciate the Pyrrhonist's *ad hominem* style of argumentation and the real challenge posed by the mode from disagreement. As will become clear, these three points are intimately related.

I will begin by presenting both the way in which the Agrippan modes are supposed to induce universal suspension of judgment and the relations among them. I will argue that the mode from disagreement is not merely a psychologically useful aid for the

induction of suspension of judgment, because it in itself poses a serious challenge to the epistemic credentials of our beliefs. I will then examine the Pyrrhonist's *ad hominem* use of the Five Modes and the sense in which he may be said to assent to them. Finally, I will argue that, given both his uncommitted attitude towards the soundness of these modes and the role played by disagreement in his argumentative strategy, some objections recently raised to Agrippan Pyrrhonism do not pose a serious problem for the Pyrrhonist's outlook.<sup>1</sup>

Two preliminary remarks are in order. First, in my discussion of the foregoing issues, I will sometimes go beyond what is explicitly stated in the Sextan texts. In so doing, however, I will not be betraying the Pyrrhonian stance, since I think the interpretations that will be advanced are in agreement with it. Second, in offering some of these interpretations, I will refer to certain views adopted in current epistemological discussions because this will allow me to better support my case. The reason for proceeding this way is that my interest in Pyrrhonism is not merely exegetical, but also systematic.

## II. THE MODES OF AGRIPPA AND THE ROLE OF DISAGREEMENT

In the first book of the *Pyrrhonian Outlines* (*PH*), Sextus expounds three sets of modes by means of which suspension of judgment is supposed to be induced. I will here focus on the Five Modes, which constitute the most lethal weapons of the Skeptical armory due to their apparent intuitiveness and destructive power. They are disagreement, infinite regress, relativity, hypothesis, and reciprocity. Sextus explains them as follows:

The mode deriving from disagreement is that by means of which we discover that, with regard to the matter proposed, there has arisen, both in ordinary life and among philosophers, an undecidable dispute (*ἀνεπίκρτον στάσις*) owing to which we end up in suspension of judgment, since we are not able to choose or to reject anything. The mode deriving from regress *ad infinitum* is that in which we say that what is offered as a warrant (*πίστις*) for the matter proposed needs another warrant, and this latter needs another, and so on *ad infinitum*, so that, given that we do not have where to start to establish it, suspension of judgment follows. The mode deriving from relativity, as we said before, is that in which the underlying object appears thus and so relative to what does the judging and to the things observed together with it, but we suspend judgment about what it is like in relation to nature. The mode deriving from hypothesis is that which arises whenever the Dogmatists, being thrown back *ad infinitum*, start from something which they do not establish, but which they deem worthy to assume simply and without proof by virtue of a concession. The reciprocal mode arises whenever that which ought to be confirmatory of the matter investigated needs a warrant from what is investigated. In this case, as we are not able to take either to establish the other, we suspend judgment about both. (*PH* I 165–169; cf. Diogenes Laertius [DL] IX 88–89)<sup>2</sup>

Some remarks are in order. To begin with, despite what Sextus says in the quoted text, the immediately following passage (*PH* I 170–177)—in which he explains the manner in which the modes work in combination with one another to bring about suspension regarding every object of investigation—makes it clear that the

modes of infinite regress, hypothesis, and reciprocity cannot induce suspension separately. For each requires collaboration with the other two in order to weave the web that will trap those who endeavor to justify any belief using different strategies, namely, by claiming that some beliefs are basic or self-evident, or that a belief is justified provided it forms part of a system of mutually supporting beliefs, or that a belief is justified provided one can offer an infinite series of reasons in its support (cf. Barnes 1990, 113–120). The three modes in question constitute what in contemporary epistemology is known as “Agrippa’s trilemma” or the “epistemic regress problem.”<sup>3</sup> Much of recent epistemology is devoted to responding to the trilemma, even though few authors are familiar with the way in which it was used by the ancient Pyrrhonists.

As regards the mode from disagreement, it is plain that the mere existence of a disagreement does not rationally warrant suspension of judgment, because the fact that there is disagreement about a given topic does not determine that one cannot choose one of the rival positions as being correct. This is why, when he presents the mode from disagreement at *PH* I 165, Sextus speaks of “undecidable” or “unresolvable” dispute: it is the fact that we have so far been unable to resolve the dispute about a given question that leads us to suspend judgment on that question. Now, it appears that the Skeptic’s inability to resolve any dispute among Dogmatic positions actually is the product of the application of the Agrippan trilemma to any attempt at rationally justifying one of those positions. As the explanation at *PH* I 170–177 seems to indicate and as scholars usually point out, the mode from disagreement presents the material upon which the other three modes operate. Someone might then argue that this mode actually consists in the presentation of a dispute and the application of the trilemma to it in order to show that the dispute cannot be settled.<sup>4</sup> When applied to a disagreement, these three modes work in an interrelated manner: when we attempt to escape from one of them in our endeavor to warrant a given claim, we fall into one of the other two. Given that the different parties to a disagreement get caught in the trap set by those modes when they attempt to justify their positions, one cannot prefer any one of the parties to the others. As a result, one must suspend judgment about which of the conflicting views, if any, is correct.<sup>5</sup> The mode from disagreement might therefore be interpreted as a complex argumentative strategy designed to induce suspension of judgment. The heart of the strategy appears to be the Agrippan trilemma since, in blocking any attempt at resolving disagreements, it poses a seemingly insurmountable skeptical challenge.

In this connection, it should be noted that the trilemma can in principle induce suspension even in the absence of a disagreement. For even if there is no dispute about the truth of a given claim, we may ask how that claim is warranted and then attack, by means of the trilemma, the different strategies purporting to provide us with the required warrant. This is the reason why Jonathan Barnes has claimed that disagreement

is not an epistemologically necessary condition for the generation of scepticism. Rather, it should be thought of as a psychologically useful aid to the sceptic. If there is no disagreement at all on some issue, then you might well— if erroneously—imagine that there was no room or reason for doubt, that you

were justified in assenting to the opinion insofar as there was no dissentient voice. Hence the observation of disagreement is pertinent to Pyrrhonism: it draws attention to the fact that assent should not be given without ado—doubt *might* be raised because doubts *have* been raised. (Barnes 1990, 116)

It could be argued that claiming that Agrippa's trilemma can by itself bring about suspension of judgment is problematic because, in the absence of actual disagreements, the Pyrrhonist would lose one of the necessary conditions for his Skeptical stance. This view is supported by at least two passages. First, at *PH I 8*, Sextus defines Skepticism as

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

Second, at *PH I 31*, he points out that, "speaking rather generally, one could say that [suspension of judgment] arises through the opposition of things." Hence, setting up oppositions seems to be essential to inducing suspension of judgment. Now, one may argue that the different kinds of oppositions mentioned by Sextus at *PH I 31–34* fall within the mode from disagreement because the parties to any disagreement are opposing or rival. In fact, I think that when talking of oppositions among both perceptual and intellectual appearances, Sextus refers to any kind of disagreement between rival claims or arguments that express or are based on conflicting appearances. From this one may conclude that, if one leaves aside the mode from disagreement, one is distorting the nature of Pyrrhonism. There is, however, no reason why the conception of Pyrrhonism expressed in the quoted passages should prevent one from discovering new applications or implications of the Agrippan modes insofar as they develop and reinforce a strategy already present in these modes. If this is correct, then one is not betraying the spirit of Pyrrhonism when using only the modes of infinite regress, reciprocity, and hypothesis to induce suspension. In fact, one is rather strengthening the Pyrrhonist's outlook by offering one possible rebuttal of the objection that, given that disagreements are not pervasive and given that inducing suspension rests on the actual existence of disagreements, then this state of mind can at most be induced in a limited number of cases.

Even though I agree with Barnes that Agrippa's trilemma can in principle induce suspension independently of the existence of a dispute because one may always ask on which grounds a given belief is held, there are three reasons why I do not think that disagreement should be considered merely a psychological aid or reminder. The first is that for quite a few epistemologists it is illegitimate to ask for a belief's grounds in the absence of a concrete challenge or a real defeater or evidence to the contrary.<sup>6</sup> The existence of a disagreement can be taken to constitute such a challenge or defeater or evidence that calls into question a belief's epistemic credentials. Indeed, if, e.g., a person whom I consider to be as well-informed about the subject under dispute as I am and as reliable in evaluating the evidence as I am disagrees with me, then I can take this disagreement as evidence—more precisely, as higher-order evidence—that I might be wrong in holding the belief I hold. Only once such a disagreement arises, one can make use of the Agrippan trilemma to

show that, in the end, none of the parties appear to be able to rationally ground their positions.

The second reason for rejecting Barnes's interpretation is that the mode from disagreement may lead to suspension even without the application of Agrippa's trilemma. Faced with, e.g., a moral disagreement, a person may find all the rival arguments equally sound or convincing, thereby being unable to give his assent to any one of them. Such equipollence is the result of how credible each one of the arguments appears to the person in question, not of the fact that each one of them has been caught in the web woven by the trilemma. Similarly, a disagreement between incompatible positions may be deemed unresolvable when none of the parties has any discernible epistemic advantage over the others as far as intelligence, thoughtfulness, objectivity, sanity, and familiarity with the relevant evidence and arguments are concerned. In fact, the burgeoning area of inquiry known as "the epistemology of disagreement" is centered on the question, when there is controversy between epistemic peers—i.e., persons who are familiar with the available evidence and arguments bearing on the disputed matter to roughly the same degree and who have similar intellectual virtues or skills—what is the rational response? One of the two main views adopted in the literature is conciliationism, according to which, when confronted with a peer disagreement, one should significantly revise one's belief. Depending on whether one adopts a coarse-grained or a fine-grained approach to doxastic attitudes, what this view claims is that, in the face of peer disagreement, the disputants should either suspend judgment or split the difference in the degrees of confidence in their respective beliefs.<sup>7</sup> I should emphasize that I am not claiming that this epistemological view is to be identified with Pyrrhonism. In fact, there are three important differences between them. The first is that the notion of epistemic peer is alien to Pyrrhonism: the Pyrrhonist would resist any criterion for identifying epistemic peerhood, since this would commit him to the view that it is also possible to identify epistemic superiority and inferiority. If he held such a view, his global suspension of judgment would be undermined. The second difference is that, unlike the conciliationist, the Pyrrhonist would not affirm that one is rationally required to suspend judgment when one is confronted with incompatible positions and has no epistemic criterion that makes it possible to adjudicate the dispute. Rather, he conceives of suspension of judgment as a *πάθος* or a psychological state that is forced upon him when confronted with positions that strike him as equipollent or equally credible. The third difference is that the Pyrrhonist regards undecidable disputes as pervasive, whereas the conciliationist thinks that unresolvable peer disagreements are not the norm. Despite these differences, what is important for present purposes is that conciliationism shows that it is possible to withhold assent in the face of dispute even without making use of Agrippa's trilemma.<sup>8</sup> In fact, in their analysis of peer disagreement, conciliationists make no reference to the trilemma. What about Sextus? In a number of passages in which he makes no use of the modes of infinite regress, reciprocity, and hypothesis, he says that the Pyrrhonist is compelled to suspend judgment in the face of disagreements. For instance, in his exposition of the Tenth Mode of Aenesidemus, he reviews various cases of conflicting moral judgments and practices that appear to be relative to, or shaped by, factors such as

the customs, ways of life, and mythical beliefs of the disputants. He concludes by saying that it is necessary that one suspend judgment about the nature of things, restricting oneself to reporting how they appear to be in relation to those factors (*PH* I 145–163). As for the current epistemological debate about peer disagreement, although the notion of epistemic peerhood is not found in the Sextan texts, a contemporary Pyrrhonist would have no qualms about using it as grist for his mill, particularly when dealing with recent objections to Agrippan Pyrrhonism. I will come back to this point in Section IV.

The final reason for not considering the mode from disagreement as a mere psychological aid is that, as we will see in Section IV, in the case of general epistemological theories that offer different solutions to Agrippa's trilemma, the Pyrrhonist cannot make use of the trilemma to attack these theories without begging the question. However, he can still appeal to the mode from disagreement in order to emphasize the long-standing and deep-rooted debate between the advocates of the distinct epistemological theories and can press them to explain how this debate is supposed to be impartially settled.

### III. *AD HOMINEM* ARGUMENTATION AND NON-DOXASTIC ASSENT

A question that naturally arises when examining the Pyrrhonist's use of the Five Modes is whether he endorses the criteria of epistemic justification underlying them. In fact, some scholars maintain that he is in the end committed to the Agrippan modes and thinks that their negative epistemological conclusions are inescapable and, hence, that the search for truth is forever doomed to failure.<sup>9</sup> The problem is that, if this were indeed the case, then the Pyrrhonist would hold epistemological views in much the same way as do the Dogmatists whose theories are attacked in *PH* II and in *Adversus Dogmaticos* (*AD*) I–II. There are, however, at least two reasons for denying any commitment to the Five Modes on the Skeptic's part.<sup>10</sup>

The first reason is that one should interpret everything Sextus says about how the Five Modes work as mere reports of the way things appear to him. At the very beginning of *PH*, he warns us that “we will give an outline of the Skeptical way, with the caveat that we affirm none of the things to be discussed that they certainly are just as we say they are, but rather we report descriptively on each thing according to how it appears to us now” (*PH* I 4; cf. *PH* I 135, 198, *AD* V 18–20). This passage makes it clear that the appearances in question are non-epistemic or non-doxastic, since reporting on how things appear is contrasted with affirming how they are. Applied to the modes, I take this general caveat to mean that the Pyrrhonist refrains from asserting that they are sound arguments.

The second reason for arguing that the Pyrrhonist is not committed to the criteria of epistemic justification underpinning the Five Modes concerns the Agrippan trilemma. It may be argued that Sextus makes use of those criteria simply because they are accepted by his Dogmatic rivals. That is to say, the arguments in which Sextus applies the trilemma are merely *ad hominem*, since they are parasitic on the Dogmatists' own standards of epistemic justification: the Dogmatists themselves adopt those criteria for conducting their reasoning and grounding their doctrines.<sup>11</sup> We know that some ancient Dogmatists explicitly deemed regression *ad infinitum*

and reciprocal reasoning (and circular reasoning more generally)<sup>12</sup> to be unacceptable ways to justify a given claim.<sup>13</sup> And from Sextus we also know that certain Dogmatists considered bare assertion to be an ineffective means of warranting a claim because the opposite assertion may be set out (see *AD* II 360, 463–464).

An important point that has been overlooked by those who have examined the Pyrrhonist's use of the Agrippan trilemma is that, even though he is not committed to the conception of epistemic justification at work in it, it seems plausible that his philosophical milieu has influenced him in such a way that that conception still exerts some kind of psychological effect on him. During the philosophical journey that led him to Skepticism, the Pyrrhonist was still a Dogmatist, and as such he endorsed the criteria of epistemic justification underlying the trilemma. Although *qua* Pyrrhonist he no longer endorses these criteria,<sup>14</sup> it is reasonable to suppose that his past commitment continues to have some sort of psychological influence on him in such a way that he spontaneously finds unacceptable a piece of reasoning that is circular or a chain of justification that does not come to an end or a claim made without offering any reasons that back it up. We may therefore say that, in a sense, the Pyrrhonist assents to the standards of justification underlying the Agrippan trilemma. But such assent is to be understood as non-doxastic, since it merely consists in yielding to or acquiescing in the appearances (*φαντασῖα*) or affections (*πάθη*) that are forced upon him (see *PH* I 13, 19, 193; cf. *PH* I 230). At this point we should remember that apparent things (*τὰ φαινόμενα*) are the Pyrrhonist's criterion of action (*PH* I 21–22) and induce his assent involuntarily (*PH* I 19). This criterion is fourfold, one of its parts being the “guidance of nature,” which is that by virtue of which he is naturally capable of perceiving and thinking (*PH* I 24).<sup>15</sup> We may reasonably assume that the Pyrrhonist's natural capability of thinking includes the use of certain ordinary and philosophical standards of justification (*pace* Striker 2001, 119n7). Such a use is not the result of an alleged rationalism (concealed or otherwise), but rather something inculcated in him by, e.g., the education he received, the cultural context in which he was raised, and his training as a philosopher, factors that have shaped his intellectual appearances. The non-doxastic assent in question explains why the Pyrrhonist's use of the Agrippan trilemma in his examination of disputes induces suspension not only in his Dogmatic rival but also in himself. There is of course a crucial difference between them: whereas the Dogmatist's suspension is to be understood as a requirement of rationality, the Pyrrhonist's suspension is to be understood as a psychological constraint.<sup>16</sup>

What about the mode from disagreement? In the previous section, I argued that this mode is not merely a psychological aid for the induction of suspension, one of the reasons being that, for Sextus, the existence of disputes seems to trigger a demand for justification. Does this not entail that he is in the end committed to what is today known as “the dialectical conception of justification”?<sup>17</sup> In fact, some epistemologists maintain that he relies on this epistemological view.<sup>18</sup> Although it is true that, in his argumentative practice, Sextus takes the very existence of a disagreement as a challenge to the epistemic credentials of a person's beliefs, I think it is a mistake to go so far as to claim that he endorses the dialectical conception of justification. The reason is simply that, if he did, he would be holding an epistemological view he believes to be correct, which is clearly at odds with his

suspension of judgment. As with Agrippa's trilemma, Sextus could offer different explanations of his use of the mode from disagreement. First, he could say that he is arguing in an *ad hominem* manner, basing his argumentative strategy on his rivals' epistemological commitments. He observes that Dogmatists disagree about any possible topic of investigation and that they try to persuade each other of the correctness of their views either by defending them or by attacking their opponents' views. Dogmatists thus seem both to take their rivals' disagreement as posing an epistemic challenge they need to meet and to believe that their rivals must address the objections they raise. Second, Sextus could argue that, as a matter of fact, he is psychologically influenced by a conception of justification to which he used to adhere or which is common in his philosophical milieu, without this implying strong or doxastic assent to it. Third, he could point out that, given the entrenched and unsettled controversies between Dogmatists to which he is witness, whenever he is presented with a disputed view and urged to endorse it, he cannot but ask both whether there is any reason why he should endorse that view instead of the rival ones and how it could be defended from the objections raised against it. Finally, if the decision not to respond to a challenge from someone who disagrees with one were regarded as a sign of intellectual conceit or arrogance, which is an attitude Sextus views as characteristic of Dogmatism (*PH* III 280–281), then that may be a powerful reason for him to prefer the practice of giving and asking for reasons.

An objection that could be raised to the Pyrrhonist's argumentative strategy as it has been described here is that, if his arguments simply express different ways in which things appear to him and not beliefs to which he is committed, they will not be able to convince or persuade his Dogmatic rivals. This objection ignores that whether or not someone is convinced or persuaded by an argument does not necessarily depend upon whether or not the person who presents the argument regards it as sound. For instance, a student may find an argument convincing or persuasive even though (i) he does not know whether the professor who expounds it believes that it is sound, or (ii) he knows that the professor thinks that it is unsound, or (iii) he knows that the professor suspends judgment about whether it is sound.

#### **IV. AGRIPPA'S TRILEMMA AND ITS QUESTIONABLE ASSUMPTIONS**

Given that the skeptical challenge posed by the Agrippan trilemma occupies a prominent place in current philosophical discussions, I would now like to consider the views of those analytic epistemologists and experimental philosophers who have claimed to uncover the problematic presuppositions underpinning the trilemma. Their interpretations of the trilemma seem to pose a serious problem for the Pyrrhonist's argumentative strategy insofar as they show that the trilemma rests on a conception of justification that is neither unquestionable nor universally shared. I will argue, however, that such interpretations fail to take account of both the Pyrrhonist's *ad hominem* use of the Agrippan modes and the epistemic significance of the mode from disagreement.<sup>19</sup>

Michael Williams has argued that there are two distinct ways of dealing with the challenge posed by the Modes of Agrippa. One is the "direct" approach, which



takes these modes “more or less at face value, accepting the skeptic’s options while trying to put a better face on one of them” (2004, 124). The problem of this approach is that, once the challenge is accepted, it cannot be met. The other way is the “diagnostic” approach, which claims that the set of Agrippan modes “does not fall naturally out of everyday ideas about knowledge and justification, but rather trades on unacknowledged and problematic theoretical preconceptions” (125). The advantage of this diagnosis, which dispels the Agrippan modes’ “air of intuitiveness” by showing that they distort our everyday epistemic practices, is that, once we give up the theoretical presuppositions underpinning them, their challenge may be declined. Those contentious presuppositions constitute what Williams calls the “Prior Grounding” conception of justification. According to this conception, it is always epistemically irresponsible to hold a belief on inadequate grounds—grounds being evidence to which the believer has cognitive access and in virtue of which he holds the belief in question (128–129). In other words, epistemic responsibility is linked with grounding, which in turn is identified with the possession of citable evidence. Williams maintains that this view should be abandoned in favor of a “Default and Challenge” conception of justification, since this is in accord with our ordinary epistemic procedures.<sup>20</sup> According to such a conception, “a person is entitled to a belief in the absence of appropriate ‘defeaters,’ i.e., reasons to think that he is *not* so entitled” (132). In the absence of concrete challenges entered in a particular situation or context, there is no obligation to give reasons when laying a claim to knowledge. If Williams is right, then the possible use of the modes of infinite regress, reciprocity, and hypothesis to induce suspension by themselves would be completely arbitrary. For such a use demands, as we saw in Section II, that one offer grounds for any given belief even in the absence of a disagreement that could be taken as a challenge to the belief in question. It should be noted, though, that Williams also rejects the idea that the existence of a disagreement should automatically trigger the need for justification, because there is no reason why the mere fact that a person’s view is not shared by others should “place a severe justificatory burden” on that person (134).<sup>21</sup>

From the perspective of experimental philosophy, Shaun Nichols, Stephen Stich, and Jonathan M. Weinberg have contended that, contrary to what some epistemologists believe, the intuitions underlying the arguments for Cartesian or external world skepticism are not universal, i.e., “shared by everyone (or almost everyone) who thinks reflectively about knowledge” (2003, 227).<sup>22</sup> Their study is based on the results both of a series of standard epistemic thought experiments they conducted themselves and of two research projects in cross-cultural psychology conducted by others. They maintain that the evidence *suggests* that “many of the intuitions epistemologists invoke vary with the cultural background, socio-economic status, and educational background of the person offering the intuition” (227), and that “the appeal of skeptical arguments is culturally local and that this fact justifies a kind of ‘meta-skepticism’ since it suggests that crucial premises in the arguments for skepticism are not to be trusted” (228). Even though they limit their inquiry to Cartesian skepticism, the authors point out that the principles underlying Agrippa’s trilemma too are supported by intuitions, and that something similar to the argument they put forward against Cartesian skepticism “might at some later date find

a Pyrrhonian target” (246–247n4). If the preliminary and tentative conclusion the authors draw regarding external world skepticism were correct and if it could be applied to Agrippan Pyrrhonism, then one should acknowledge that this form of skepticism too relies upon factors such as cultural context, socio-economic status, and educational background (including philosophical training), and hence that the appeal of Agrippa’s trilemma is context-dependent.

The two views just expounded are similar in that they both affirm that the modes that constitute the trilemma are dependent upon or relative to a certain epistemological, cultural, educational, or socio-economic framework, and hence that there is no reason we should accept their conclusions as inescapable.<sup>23</sup> If so, then the skeptical challenge posed by the Agrippan trilemma is much less epistemically significant than the Pyrrhonist might think. This seeming relativity of the trilemma would not, however, represent a problem for the Pyrrhonist, since he would not deny that the trilemma works only within a certain conception of knowledge and justification. Pyrrhonian arguments are to a large extent parasitic upon the philosophical doctrines of those against whom the Pyrrhonist argues. Hence, as long as there continue to be Dogmatists who are committed to the conception of epistemic justification underpinning the trilemma, the Pyrrhonist will have a reason to use this argumentative weapon. Given that his style of argumentation is chameleonic, if his Dogmatic rivals adopted a conception of epistemic justification different from that undergirding the trilemma, the Pyrrhonist would adapt to this new context and would try to elaborate other modes that would rest upon that different conception. The Agrippan trilemma’s reliance on certain epistemological presuppositions would only represent a problem for those who embrace such presuppositions and who believe that the trilemma poses an insurmountable conundrum for any rational being. As we saw in Section III, the Pyrrhonist is not committed to those theoretical presuppositions or to the soundness of the Five Modes. The two interpretations of Agrippan Pyrrhonism under consideration do not therefore undermine the Pyrrhonist’s argumentative strategy.

Peter Klein proves to be well aware of the *ad hominem* character of the Five Modes.<sup>24</sup> In particular, he claims that the Pyrrhonist takes the premises employed in the modes of infinite regress and circularity from Aristotle’s foundationalist conception of justification.<sup>25</sup> The fact that those modes work within a particular conception of epistemic warrant significantly restricts both their generality and their power. The reason is, according to Klein, that there are alternative theories—namely, infinitism and coherentism—which conceive of epistemic justification in such a way that they reject some of the assumptions of the Aristotelian conception, and which therefore accept that regress and reciprocal arguments can produce conclusions that are epistemically justified (Klein 2011, cf. Klein 2008). What Klein overlooks, however, is that although the fact that the modes of infinite regress and reciprocity rely on a given conception of epistemic warrant does restrict their scope, we should not forget that the Pyrrhonist still has at his disposal the mode from disagreement. He would note the second-order disagreement between different conceptions of knowledge and justification, and would ask to which one of them we should assent: to foundationalism, to infinitism, or to coherentism? To make matters worse, to these three more traditional solutions to the epistemic regress

problem, we should add the contextualist and the externalist. Thus, even setting aside the foundationalist conception of justification does not automatically leave us with an unquestionable epistemological theory. It is therefore necessary to come up with an effective, incontestable way of deciding between the contending theories of epistemic justification. But this is at the very least an extremely arduous task, since each side puts forward clever, elaborate, and persuasive arguments both in favor of their own position and against those of their rivals.

In addition, if we take into account the present-day epistemological discussions of peer disagreement referred to in Section II, we can ask: how are we supposed to resolve the dispute between foundationalists like Paul Moser and Jim Pryor, coherentists like the early Lawrence Bonjour and Donald Davidson, infinitists like Peter Klein and Scott Aikin, contextualists like Michael Williams and Keith DeRose, and externalists like David Armstrong and Michael Bergmann, given that there seem to be no discernible or noteworthy epistemic differences between the five groups? That is, the members of the various camps seem to be epistemic peers insofar as they are all competent epistemologists who are familiar with the relevant arguments and theories concerning knowledge and justification, and aware of the pertinent conceptual analyses and distinctions. Is there any clear-cut and uncontroversial way of adjudicating the debate between the supporters of the five epistemological theories in question? To make matters worse, within each group the members are far from agreeing, so that we also need to find a reliable touchstone for choosing between the different variants of the same general theories. Dispassionate reflection on such peer disputes seems to lead us to agnostic skepticism.

Let me also note that, confronted with Williams's claim that the epistemological ideas underlying the Agrippan trilemma are not natural or intuitive because they exaggerate or distort some aspects of our ordinary epistemic procedures, the Pyrrhonist would make use, once again, of the mode from disagreement. For he would argue that we are faced with two conflicting conceptions of justification (philosophical and ordinary), and that this conflict cannot be resolved by assuming arbitrarily that our everyday epistemic practices are to be preferred. Just as it could be argued that (certain) philosophical theories of justification are excessive and unintuitive, so too could it be argued that ordinary epistemic procedures are confusing, incoherent, and arbitrary. In this case, too, we need a clear-cut and impartial way to resolve the dispute between the rival conceptions of justification. Hence, saying that certain challenges should be dismissed because they are not raised in an everyday justificatory context does not succeed in defending some of our beliefs against the Pyrrhonian attack. The reason is that the mode from disagreement poses a serious epistemological challenge independently of Agrippa's trilemma.

What is worrisome about disagreement is that, even when the trilemma is set aside once its underlying assumptions are revealed not to be inescapable or universally shared, one is still confronted with rival conceptions of knowledge and justification and it is not clear how one is supposed to impartially decide among them. The fact that someone whom I consider to be both familiar with the evidence and arguments bearing on a given issue and as intellectually competent as I am disagrees with me over that issue gives me a reason to wonder whether I have made a mistake. In other words, the very existence of a dispute can be taken to yield a full

or partial defeater for the justification of each disputant's belief. This is precisely what happens with contemporary epistemologists, who regard the very fact that their peers hold contrary views as a challenge to their own. The challenge posed by disagreement is in this case much more serious because the issue in question is the subject of a long-standing dispute involving what are supposed to be the best philosophical minds. In such a situation, the Pyrrhonist would kindly ask each party to the disagreement to share the knockdown arguments that compellingly and impartially establish that they are right. But although the contending parties engage in an elaborate dialectical exchange and although they are all intellectually respected and well-trained philosophers, none succeeds in convincing the others because they lack an agreed-upon criterion that would make it possible to neutrally settle the dispute.

Before concluding, I would like to address two objections to my interpretation of Sextan Pyrrhonism. The first is that, so long as Sextus's arguments are *ad hominem* and his own suspension of judgment is to be understood as a psychological constraint rather than as a requirement of rationality, it is not clear that he is doing epistemology. This is viewed as problematic because those present-day epistemologists who engage with Sextan Pyrrhonism are responding to an epistemic program. To my mind, whether or not Sextus is doing epistemology depends on how one conceives of this activity. If for someone to do epistemology it is required that they endorse some theory about the nature and the possibility of knowledge and justification, then it is plain that Sextus is not doing epistemology. But if for someone to do epistemology it is only required that they be able to examine and discuss the claims and arguments of those who hold any such theory, then there is no reason for denying that he is doing epistemology. The fact that Sextus has no epistemological commitments should not make us lose sight of the fact that he does not deny the possibility of the Dogmatists' epistemological project, but only suspends judgment about it. Indeed, given that the Pyrrhonist open-mindedly keeps on investigating whether there is a truth about the matters on which he has so far suspended judgment (*PH* I 1–3, II 11), he sincerely and carefully assesses the epistemic credentials of the Dogmatists' views.

The second objection is that the *ad hominem* character of the Skeptic's argumentation yields a serious restriction for Pyrrhonian ethics insofar as Sextus points out that the Skeptic attains his goal of undisturbedness (*ἀταραξία*) by suspending judgment. For if his arguments are parasitic upon his Dogmatic rivals' own commitments, then the suspension of judgment induced by some of those arguments is forced only upon the Dogmatists. I have elsewhere argued that the search for, and the attainment of, the state of undisturbedness are not essential to Pyrrhonism (see Machuca 2006). But leaving this aside, we should bear in mind that the fact that the Skeptic's arguments are *ad hominem* (and dialectical more generally) means that he is not committed to their soundness, not that he dismisses them out of hand in his own inquiries. In these inquiries, the Pyrrhonist may, e.g., consider both an *ad hominem* argument against a given view and a contrary argument in its favor. So far, whenever he has done so in his investigation of truth, such arguments have appeared to him to be epistemically on a par, which at least up till now has induced him to suspend judgment.

## V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

At present, “Agrippan Pyrrhonism” may mean two very different things: (i) the outlook that makes use of the Five Modes in order to show to the Dogmatists that, by their own criteria of epistemic justification, it is not possible to justify our beliefs, or (ii) the view that endorses those criteria and concludes on the basis of the Five Modes that no belief is ever justified. The first type of Agrippan Pyrrhonism corresponds to ancient Pyrrhonism as presented by Sextus, whereas the second type corresponds to the picture of Pyrrhonism depicted by some contemporary authors on the basis of their analysis of the Agrippan modes.<sup>26</sup> This analysis, in addition, is almost exclusively focused on Agrippa’s trilemma, thus ignoring the epistemological challenge posed by the mode from disagreement, which does play a key role in the ancient Pyrrhonist’s argumentative strategy.<sup>27</sup> The uncommitted character of the ancient version of Agrippan Pyrrhonism together with its strong emphasis on disagreement makes it much more subtle and challenging than its contemporary counterpart.<sup>28</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. I will use ‘Skepticism’ and ‘Skeptic’ with a capital ‘S’ to refer to the Pyrrhonist and his outlook. Also, following Sextus, I will use the terms ‘Dogmatist’ and ‘Dogmatic’ to refer to anyone who makes assertions about how things are on the basis of what he considers to be objective evidence and sound arguments.
2. In translating the passages from Sextus’s works, I have consulted Annas and Barnes 2000; Bury 1933–1949; and Mates 1996.
3. As far as I know, the first to have used the expression ‘Agrippa’s trilemma’ is Williams 1988, 570.
4. I should note that here I am only examining a possible interpretation of the nature of the mode from disagreement. As will become clear later on, I myself do not think that this mode incorporates the trilemma, but that it poses a serious skeptical challenge on its own.
5. As will become clear in Section III, the ‘must’ in this sentence is to be interpreted psychologically or normatively depending on whether the Pyrrhonist is talking *in propria persona* or arguing against his Dogmatic rivals, respectively. For further discussion of whether suspension of judgment is to be construed as a psychological constraint or as a requirement of rationality, see Machuca 2011b, 71–73. This issue is closely related to the broader question whether the Pyrrhonist is committed to the canons of rationality. In Machuca 2011b, 74–75, I argue that he is not. For the contrary view, see Perin 2010, Chapter 2.
6. As we will see in Section IV, Michael Williams defends this view.
7. Different conciliatory views are defended by, e.g., Feldman 2006, 2007, 2009; Christensen 2007, 2011; and Elga 2007, 2010. The other main view on peer disagreement in the current debate, known as *steadfastness* or *non-conciliationism*, maintains that, in a considerable number of cases, it is possible to retain one’s belief either with the same degree of confidence or with a slightly diminished degree of confidence. Distinct steadfast views are endorsed by van Inwagen 1996, 2010; Plantinga 2000; Kelly 2005, 2010; and Sosa 2010.
8. The Agrippan trilemma could, of course, be applied to disputes between epistemic peers. For if each of the disputants attempted to prove that his epistemic status is actually superior

to that of his rival, then the trilemma could be used to show that such attempts fail and, hence, that the rival parties seem indeed to be epistemically on a par. In Machuca 2013, I examine peer disagreement from a Pyrrhonian perspective.

9. See Palmer 2000, 365, 373, and Striker 2001, 120–121.

10. A reviewer for this journal has pointed out to me that I am here arguing against a straw man. However, as the passages referred to in the previous note make clear, Palmer and Striker do believe that the Pyrrhonist is in the end committed to the negative conclusions of the Five Modes. And as we will see later on in this section, other authors maintain that the Pyrrhonist is committed to the dialectical conception of justification. For this reason, I do not think that I am arguing against a distorted version of the position of any of these authors. It is also for this reason that I do not think that the interpretation I am here defending is unanimously accepted.

11. See Williams 1988; Fogelin 1994, 115–116; Bailey 2002, 259–262; and Striker 2004, 16.

12. Sextus's mode of reciprocity exclusively deals with arguments that have only two propositions, but these arguments are a subclass of circular argument and the mode of reciprocity can work against circular argument in general (see Barnes 1990, 61, 64–65).

13. See the texts quoted in Barnes 1990, 36–38, 47, 58–59, 76; also Long 2006, 48–51.

14. See Bailey 2002, 142, 264–266.

15. Similarly, according to Diogenes Laertius, the Pyrrhonists claim: “we agree that we see and recognize that we think, but we are ignorant how we see and how we think” (DL IX 103).

16. Markus Lammenranta contends that the normative interpretation of why the Pyrrhonist suspends judgment in the face of unresolvable disagreement is to be preferred because the psychological interpretation does not give rise to a serious skeptical problem (2008, 14–17, 29–30; 2011, 204n2, 205). However, by distinguishing the Pyrrhonist's suspension from the Dogmatist's, one can retain the psychological interpretation of the former while preserving the skeptical problem faced by the Dogmatist. For no matter how the Pyrrhonist describes his own suspension, the skeptical problem arises for the Dogmatist because he is required to suspend judgment by his own standards of rationality.

17. According to the dialectical conception of justification, one must be able to defend a claim one has made in case it is challenged by one's interlocutor. Among the proponents of this conception, some maintain that all claims must be defended merely because they have been challenged, whereas others contend that some claims have a privileged status because of which they do not require defense when challenged. For a presentation and critical discussion of these two positions on dialectical justification, see Rescorla 2009a, 2009b.

18. See, e.g., Rescorla 2009a, 2009b; Aikin 2011; and Wieland 2013.

19. A reviewer has objected that contemporary epistemologists are not arguing against Sextus but against each other. This objection overlooks both the fact that some authors (e.g., Klein 2011) explicitly engage with Sextus's texts and the fact that at least many of them, when talking of “Pyrrhonian skepticism,” make no distinction between ancient Pyrrhonism and present-day neo-Pyrrhonism. In addition, as we saw in Section III, some contemporary epistemologists explicitly claim that Sextus endorses the dialectical conception of justification.

20. Williams 2011, 130 now calls this conception of justification “default and query.”

21. On this sort of “default and challenge” conception of justification, see also Leite 2005.

22. By ‘intuition’ they understand “a spontaneous judgement about the truth or falsity of a proposition—a judgement for which the person making the judgement may be able to offer little or no further justification” (2003, 246n3).
23. A similar view is advanced by Moser 1997 in his discussion of the neo-Pyrrhonian stance defended by Fogelin 1994.
24. Curiously enough, in his 1988 paper Williams too is well aware of this fact.
25. Ancient philosophy scholars have considered it probable that the Five Modes were inspired by the first book of Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, where he discusses arguments corresponding to the modes of infinite regress, reciprocity, and hypothesis. See Barnes 1990, 121–122, and Long 2006, 48–51; also Anagnostopoulos 1993, 116–118; Bett 1999, 27–29; and Striker 2001, 126–127; 2004, 21.
26. As already noted at the beginning of Section II, even some scholars of ancient skepticism claim that the Pyrrhonist endorses the Agrippan modes and believes that their negative epistemological conclusions are inescapable.
27. Lammenranta (2008, 2011) is in this respect an exception.
28. Ancestors of this essay were delivered at Durham University (October 2009), the Universidade Federal da Bahia (August 2010), and Johns Hopkins University (October 2011). I am grateful to the audiences at these venues for challenging discussion. I would also like to thank Stéphane Marchand and the two anonymous reviewers for this journal for their critical comments on a previous version.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aikin, Scott. 2011. *Epistemology and the Regress Problem*. New York: Routledge.
- Anagnostopoulos, Georgios. 1993. “Aristotle and Scepticism.” *Skepsis* 4: 113–142.
- Annas, Julia and Jonathan Barnes (trans.). 2000. *Sextus Empiricus: Outlines of Scepticism*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bailey, Alan. 2002. *Sextus Empiricus and Pyrrhonian Scepticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198238522.001.0001>
- Barnes, Jonathan. 1990. *The Toils of Scepticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bett, Richard. 1999. “Reactions to Aristotle in the Greek Sceptical Traditions.” *Méthexis* 12: 17–34.
- Bury, Robert Gregg (trans.). 1933–1949. *Sextus Empiricus*. 4 vols. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Christensen, David. 2007. “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News.” *Philosophical Review* 116: 187–217. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/00318108-2006-035>
- Christensen, David. 2011. “Disagreement, Question-Begging and Epistemic Self-Criticism.” *Philosophers’ Imprint* 11/6: 1–22.
- Elga, Adam. 2007. “Reflection and Disagreement.” *Noûs* 41: 478–502. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0068.2007.00656.x>
- Elga, Adam. 2010. “How to Disagree about How to Disagree.” In Feldman and Warfield 2010, 175–186.
- Feldman, Richard. 2006. “Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement.” In *Epistemology Futures*, ed. Stephen Hetherington, 216–236. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Feldman, Richard. 2007. "Reasonable Religious Disagreements." In *Philosophers without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*, ed. Louise Antony, 194–214. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Feldman, Richard. 2009. "Evidentialism, Higher-Order Evidence, and Disagreement." *Episteme* 6: 294–312. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/E1742360009000720>
- Feldman, Richard, and Ted Warfield (eds.). 2010. *Disagreement*. New York: Oxford University Press. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199226078.001.0001>
- Fogelin, Robert. 1994. *Pyrrhonian Reflections on Knowledge and Justification*. New York: Oxford University Press. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/0195089871.001.0001>
- Greco, John (ed.). 2008. *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*. New York: Oxford University Press. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195183214.001.0001>
- Kelly, Thomas. 2005. "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement." *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* 1: 167–196.
- Kelly, Thomas. 2010. "Peer Disagreement and Higher-Order Evidence." In Feldman and Warfield 2010, 111–174.
- Klein, Peter. 2008. "Contemporary Responses to Agrippa's Trilemma." In Greco 2008, 484–503.
- Klein, Peter. 2011. "Epistemic Justification and the Limits of Pyrrhonism." In Machuca 2011a, 79–96.
- Lammenranta, Markus. 2008. "The Pyrrhonian Problematic." In Greco 2008, 9–33.
- Lammenranta, Markus. 2011. "Skepticism and Disagreement." In Machuca 2011a, 203–215.
- Leite, Adam. 2005. "A Localist Solution to the Regress of Epistemic Justification." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83: 395–421. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048400500191974>
- Long, Anthony. 2006. "Aristotle and the History of Greek Scepticism." In his *From Epicurus to Epictetus: Studies in Hellenistic and Roman Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 43–69. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199279128.003.0003>
- Machuca, Diego. 2006. "The Pyrrhonist's ἀταραξία and φιλιανθρωπία." *Ancient Philosophy* 26: 111–139. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5840/ancientphil200626141>
- Machuca, Diego. (ed.). 2011a. *Pyrrhonism in Ancient, Modern, and Contemporary Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Machuca, Diego. 2011b. "Pyrrhonism and the Law of Non-Contradiction." In Machuca 2011a, 51–77.
- Machuca, Diego. 2013. "A Neo-Pyrrhonian Approach to the Epistemology of Disagreement." In *Disagreement and Skepticism*, ed. Diego Machuca, 66–89. New York: Routledge.
- Mates, Benson. 1996. *The Skeptic Way: Sextus Empiricus's Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moser, Paul. 1997. "The Relativity of Skepticism." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57: 401–406. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2953727>
- Nichols, Shaun, Stephen Stich, and Jonathan M. Weinberg. 2003. "Meta-skepticism: Meditations in Ethno-epistemology." In *The Sceptics: Contemporary Essays*, ed. Steven Luper, 227–247. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Palmer, John. 2000. "Skeptical Investigation." *Ancient Philosophy* 20: 351–375. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5840/ancientphil200020234>
- Perin, Casey. 2010. *The Demands of Reason: An Essay on Pyrrhonian Scepticism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199557905.001.0001>



- Plantinga, Alvin. 2000. "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism." In *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, ed. Kevin Meeker and Philip Quinn, 172–192. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rescorla, Michael. 2009a. "Epistemic and Dialectical Regress." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87: 43–60. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048400802215653>
- Rescorla, Michael. 2009b. "Shifting the Burden of Proof." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 59: 86–109. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9213.2008.555.x>
- Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter (ed.). 2004. *Pyrrhonian Skepticism*. New York: Oxford University Press. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/0195169727.001.0001>
- Sosa, Ernest. 2010. "The Epistemology of Disagreement." In *Social Epistemology*, ed. Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard, 278–297. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199577477.003.0014>
- Striker, Gisela. 2001. "Scepticism as a Kind of Philosophy." *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 83: 113–129. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/agph.83.2.113>
- Striker, Gisela. 2004. "Historical Reflections on Classical Pyrrhonism and Neo-Pyrrhonism." In Sinnott-Armstrong 2004, 13–24.
- van Inwagen, Peter. 1996. "It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence." In *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality*, ed. Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder, 137–153. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- van Inwagen, Peter. 2010. "We're Right. They're Wrong." In Feldman and Warfield 2010, 10–28.
- Wieland, Jan. 2013. "Is Justification Dialectical?" *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 3: 182–201.
- Williams, Michael. 1988. "Scepticism without Theory." *Review of Metaphysics* 41: 547–588.
- Williams, Michael. 2004. "The Agrippan Argument and Two Forms of Skepticism." In Sinnott-Armstrong 2004, 121–145.
- Williams, Michael. 2011. "Pyrrhonian Skepticism and Two Kinds of Knowledge." *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 1: 124–137. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/221057011X608872>

