

DIALECTICAL PYRRHONISM: MONTAIGNE, SEXTUS EMPIRICUS, AND THE SELF-OVERCOMING OF PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: In her book *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher*, Ann Hartle argues that Montaigne's thought is dialectical in the Hegelian sense. Unlike Hegel's *progressive* dialectic, however, Montaigne's thought is, according to Hartle, *circular* in that the reconciliation of opposed terms comes not in the form of a newly emergent term, but in a return to the first term, where the meaning of the first is transformed as a result of its dialectical interaction with the second. This analysis motivates Hartle's claim that Montaigne is not a skeptic at all, let alone a Pyrrhonian skeptic. In this paper, I argue that Hartle's circular-dialectical interpretation of Montaigne is not only compatible with Pyrrhonism, but is in fact an ideal model for understanding Sextus Empiricus's philosophical therapy.

Keywords: Montaigne, Sextus Empiricus, skepticism, Pyrrhonism, metaphilosophy

1 Placing Montaigne In Philosophical Space

There is no uncontroversial answer to the question of how we ought to characterize Montaigne's basic philosophical orientation.¹ Many read him as a skeptic of some sort, others as a Stoic or an Epicurean. Still others find in the *Essais* a movement or fluctuation between these and other philosophical positions. Alternatively, it may be a mistake to try to fit Montaigne into any preexisting doctrinal mold, or indeed any mold at all. Perhaps he is nothing but *Montaigne*, "an acute student of himself" (Frame 1958, v) in his irreducible individuality.²

¹ I use the following abbreviations in what follows: 'E' refers to Montaigne 1958 (*Essais*); 'PH' refers to Sextus Empiricus, n.d. (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism*); and 'AP' refers to Hartle 2003 (*Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher*). References to E are to book number and essay number, followed by the page number in Montaigne 1958. My reference for Montaigne's original French is the online edition of the *Essais* prepared by Philippe Desan (Montaigne, n.d.). References to PH are to book number and Fabrician section-number. English translations of Sextus are based on Sextus Empiricus 2000, though often extensively revised by me. My source for the original Greek was the online edition prepared by Emidio Spinelli (Sextus Empiricus, n.d.), though unfortunately the site has been taken offline.

² Luiz Eva writes that, in the wake of Richard Popkin's *History of Scepticism* (which first appeared in 1960), "the interpretation of Montaigne as a skeptic philosopher, once embraced by his contemporaries, became again almost a consensus, even if there is of course different readings on the meaning of his skepticism" (Eva 2009, 84). In approaching the question of whether Montaigne is a skeptic, it is important to distinguish between theoretical and practical skepticism, for it is possible to be a skeptic along only one of these dimensions: "Scholars have argued that Montaigne is a Pyrrhonian with respect to science but a dogmatist—either an Epicurean or a Stoic—when it comes to ethics" (Maia Neto 1995, 10). Some, however, deny even that he is a theoretical skeptic. Among those who hold this view is Ann Hartle, whose work I focus on below: "Montaigne is not a skeptic" of any sort (AP, 15; cf. 12–6).

Popkin, of course, argued that, on the basis of his reading of Sextus Empiricus, "Montaigne worked out... [a] complete Pyrrhonism" (Popkin 2003, 55). Others, while agreeing that Montaigne is best thought of as a Pyrrhonian, emphasize the importance of other sources of ancient skepticism for his thought,

This sad state of interpretive affairs would not have surprised Montaigne in the least.

Who would not say that glosses increase doubts and ignorance, since there is no book to be found, whether human or divine, with which the world busies itself, whose difficulties are cleared up by interpretation? The hundredth commentator hands it on to his successor thornier and rougher than the first one had found it. When do we agree and say, “There has been enough about this book; henceforth there is nothing more to say about it”? (E, 3.13, 817)

Far from clarifying texts for us, “it is evident from experience that so many interpretations disperse the truth and shatter it” (E, 3.13, 817). Despite this admonition, I shall venture in what follows to argue that Montaigne is best read as belonging within the Pyrrhonian tradition as it is exemplified in Sextus Empiricus’s *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.

Bringing together Montaigne and Sextus helps us to see that the movement of Pyrrhonism, a movement common to both thinkers, is dialectical in something like the Hegelian sense. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel envisions his “self-accomplishing skepticism” (Hegel 2018, ¶178) as a “ladder” (Hegel 2018, ¶126) by means of which we can ascend from “immediate knowledge” (which derives from direct experience), through “reflective knowledge” (an intermediary state), to the standpoint of “philosophical knowledge” (which derives from “the pure form of thinking”) (Hegel 2010, §24, Ad. 3). ‘Philosophical knowledge’ in Hegel’s sense represents the end-point of his progressive dialectic, the moment at which all oppositions are reconciled. Though it climbs the same skeptical ladder, the Pyrrhonian dialectic ends not in *philosophical knowledge* (whether of Hegel’s sort or any other), but in *learned ignorance*.³ It is this ‘skeptical’ dialectical movement that I shall explore in what follows.

particularly Cicero’s *Academica* and Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives* (e.g., Maia Neto 2004; Eva 2009). Floyd Gray finds that “Montaigne’s Pyrrhonism is closer to Pyrrho than to Sextus” (Gray 1977, 134). Others argue for a developmental reading, which may or may not include a period of genuine skepticism. In his seminal study, Pierre Villey argues that Montaigne’s thought passes through three stages: an initial Stoicism, followed by a skeptical crisis, culminating in a project of Socratic self-examination (Villey 1908). Elaine Limbrick, though maintaining that Montaigne is at all points some sort of skeptic, argues in favor of reading in the *Essais* a development from (a) radical Pyrrhonism to (b) the probabilism of the New Academy, culminating in (c) the skepticism of Socrates and the Old Academy (Limbrick 1977, 68), while Alan Levine argues that Montaigne’s skepticism is basically Academic, not Pyrrhonian (Levine 2001, 36–8, 72–8).

Yet another prominent movement in Montaigne interpretation, one that includes Frédéric Brahami, Charles Larmore, and Sylvia Giocanti, holds that his skepticism is innovative, i.e., that it is “irreducible to ancient Pyrrhonian models” (Rosaleny 2009, 60; cf. 60–70). For some, this break with ancient models goes hand-in-hand with the broader claim that Montaigne is a distinctively modern figure, particularly in his proto-Cartesian emphasis on subjectivity (cf. Rosaleny’s discussion in Rosaleny 2009, 65–6). It has been argued that Montaigne is the true fountainhead of modern philosophy, both theoretical (Toulmin 1990, 42) and practical (Schneewind 2005, 208). Others, beginning most likely with Jean-François Lyotard (Lyotard 1984, 81), have gone further and found in Montaigne a sort of preemptively *postmodern* thinker (cf. Starobinski 1985, 296–7; Hiley 1988, 23, 37; Longxi 1993).

Of the interpretive options mentioned in the opening paragraph of my paper, the least attractive to commentators seems to be the view that Montaigne’s thought cannot be made to fit into any mold, no matter how elaborate. On its face, however, this interpretation enjoys the most abundant and straightforward textual support. (See E, 1.1, 5; 1.8, 21; 2.1, 239, 242, 244; 2.6, 273; 2.20, 511; 3.2, 610; 3.5, 639–40; 3.13, 821.) I suspect that commentators hesitate to embrace this option because doing so would require curtailing, if not outright abandoning, the task of interpretation itself. In what follows, I too give in to the will to taxonomize, to “pick out and immobilize the innumerable flutterings” of Montaigne’s mind (E, 2.6, 273), though I want to acknowledge here that doing so may be a mistake.

³ For the ‘ladder’ metaphor, see Sextus Empiricus 2005, 183 (*Adversus Mathematicos*, 8.480). It is debatable, of course, whether Sextus’s and Hegel’s ladders are constructed of the same material; but for what it’s worth, Hegel himself thought they were: “The scepticism” that “first gives spirit the capacity to investigate

Too often, studies that associate later figures with (or distance them from) the ancient skeptical tradition spend too little time coming to grips with that tradition.⁴ Though I cannot hope to avoid the same charge within the scope of this paper, I shall do what I can. I devote §§2–3 to providing some much-needed context for the claim that Montaigne’s basic philosophical orientation is Pyrrhonian. In §2, I lay out, with special reference to Montaigne, some of the key differences between Pyrrhonism and what is now standardly meant by ‘skepticism.’ In §3, I discuss the ‘purity’ of the Pyrrhonian equipollence method.⁵ Then, in §4, I turn to Ann Hartle’s interpretation of Montaigne, which ascribes a dialectical structure to his thought. Hartle argues that Montaigne’s dialectic is circular, as opposed to progressive, meaning that the reconciliation of opposed terms comes not in the form of a newly emergent term, but in a return to the first term, where the meaning of the first is transformed as a result of its dialectical interaction with the second. I expound, as well as expand upon, Hartle’s interpretation, with an eye toward making the case that, *contra* Hartle, the dialectical interpretation is not only compatible with a Pyrrhonian reading of Montaigne, but is in fact an ideal model for understanding Sextus’s Pyrrhonism. In §5, I illustrate the circular-dialectical nature of Montaigne’s thought with respect to knowledge before offering some concluding remarks in §6.

2 The Three Faces of Skepticism

Adrian Kuzminski presents us with a revealing paradox when he writes that “Pyrrhonism is commonly confused with scepticism in Western philosophy” (Kuzminski 2008, ix). What he means is that Pyrrhonism is commonly confused with understandings of skepticism that are, to greater or lesser extents, foreign to it. In contemporary parlance, the skeptic is either a *denier* or a *doubter*. Both are at least potentially at odds with the outcome of Pyrrhonism.

In the opening passages of PH, Sextus contrasts Pyrrhonism with skepticism-as-denial—what has come to be called, in the secondary literature, ‘negative dogmatism’ (PH, 1.1–3). In the *Apology for Raymond Sebond*, Montaigne adopts Sextus’s tripartite division of philosophers into dogmatists (who claim to have discovered the truth), negative dogmatists (who claim the truth cannot be discovered), and skeptics (who suspend judgment and continue the inquiry) (E, 2.12, 371). (The ancient Greek word *skepsis* means ‘inquiry’ or ‘investigation.’) Expanding on the contrast between his skepticism and negative dogmatism,

what the truth is” is *Pyrrhonian* skepticism, which he contrasts favorably with modern, dogmatic skepticism (Hegel 2018, ¶78; cf. Hegel 2000, 319–22). I shall not pursue in this paper the topics of Hegel’s indebtedness to Pyrrhonism or of the differences and similarities between Hegelian and Pyrrhonian dialectic. I will say, however, that I find the similarities, as well as the extent of Hegel’s indebtedness, to be profound. On connections between Hegel and Pyrrhonism, see Forster 1989; Westphal 1989, 1998; Heidemann 2007, 2018; and Trisokkas 2012.

⁴ Regarding Montaigne, for example, Frédéric Brahami, in his influential study of Montaigne’s skepticism, devotes a mere four pages to Pyrrhonism—far too few for an adequate characterization of what he calls “la triade pyrrhonnienne,” i.e., *isostheneia* (equipollence), *epoché* (suspension of judgment), and *ataraxia* (equanimity) (Brahami 1997, 63–6). For her part, Hartle initially discharges the task of characterizing Pyrrhonism with a single sentence about Pyrrho (AP, 15). Later, she devotes two paragraphs to Sextus (AP, 104). Neither Hartle 2005 nor Hartle 2013 improve upon AP in this respect. Though its main subject is Hume, not Montaigne, an excellent counterexample to the tendency to give short shrift to the ancients in studies of modern figures is provided by Fosl 2020, which devotes fully half of its length to an in-depth account of ancient skepticism.

⁵ I should note that my discussion of Pyrrhonism in this paper was originally written as a complement to the discussion of Pyrrhonism in Eichorn 2020a. In what follows, I do not attempt to present, nor do I pretend to have presented, anything like a complete picture of Pyrrhonism, even in capsule form. For more regarding my interpretation of Pyrrhonism, see Eichorn 2014, 2020a, 2020b.

Montaigne writes that “it is my opinion that we should suspend our judgment just as much in the direction of rejecting as of accepting” (E, 3.11, 788).

This is what happened in the school of philosophy. The pride of those who attributed to the human mind a capacity for all things produced in others, through spite and emulation, the opinion that it is capable of nothing. These men maintain the same extreme in ignorance that the others maintain in knowledge (*la science*); so that it cannot be denied that man is immoderate in all things. (E, 3.11, 792)

Pyrrhonism, on the other hand, is for Montaigne the moderate middle way between the dogmatic extremes.

A wealth of textual evidence supports both an anti-dogmatic reading of Sextus and the contention that Montaigne not only read Sextus as an anti-dogmatist, but also strove to adopt such a standpoint himself. It is puzzling, therefore, that Pyrrhonism is so often conflated with negative dogmatism in the literature on Montaigne.⁶ Even more puzzling, to my mind, is the view advanced by Gianni Paganini, who argues that while Sextus espoused an anti-dogmatic position, Montaigne corrupted the original spirit of Pyrrhonism by turning it into a negative dogmatism (Paganini 2018, 237–8). Montaigne, Paganini argues, transformed Pyrrhonism into a kind of phenomenism, according to which we can know only how things appear to us to be, not how they truly are in reality, where ‘appearances’ and ‘reality’ are conceptualized in what we might call, roughly speaking, a Cartesian fashion (Paganini 2018, 238). I find this puzzling because Sextus has often, and it seems to me (as it does to Paganini) wrongly, been read as a phenomenist on the basis of the very same sort of evidence that Paganini, who does *not* read Sextus as a phenomenist, cites in claiming that Montaigne *is* a phenomenist.⁷ If such evidence fails to establish that Sextus was a phenomenist, then surely it also fails to show that Montaigne was one.

In support of his phenomenist reading of Montaigne, Paganini cites three “famous passages” from the *Apology for Raymond Sebond* (Paganini 2018, 243 fn. 9). Both the first and third turn, it seems to me, on the claim in the following passage that we are ignorant of “the true essence” of things:

We grasp an apple by almost all our senses; we find in it redness, smoothness, smell, and sweetness; besides these it may have other properties, like drying up or shrinking, to which we have no sense that corresponds. The properties that we call occult in many things, as that of the magnet to attract iron—is it not likely that there are sensory faculties in nature suitable to judge them and perceive them, and that the lack of

⁶ See Hartle 2013, 62. Another recent example is furnished by Warren Boutcher, who, in his huge, two-volume *The School of Montaigne in Early Modern Europe*, characterizes Pyrrhonism as “the school of *non-savoir*” (2017, liii), a position he dismisses without further ado as “self-contradictory” (2017, liii fn. 24).

⁷ A phenomenist reading of Sextus goes back at least to Victor Brochard’s *Les sceptiques grecs* (1887, 228). The basic idea behind such readings—namely, that Sextus claims (a) to know phenomena and (b) that knowledge of anything other than phenomena is impossible—goes further back, to Christian Wolff and, later, the first historian of skepticism, Karl Friedrich Stäudlin (see Blackwell 1998, 356). Roderick Chisholm argued that Sextus is a phenomenist (Chisholm 1941). A few decades later, Charlotte Stough argued that while Sextus’s predecessor Aenesidemus was a phenomenist (Stough 1969, 104–5), Sextus himself was not (Stough 1969, 145). Even so, Stough’s reading of Sextus was close enough to a phenomenist reading that Myles Burnyeat felt the need to clarify where he thought she had gone wrong regarding Sextus’s conception of ‘appearances’ or ‘impressions’ (Burnyeat 1980, 217). To the best of my knowledge, no contemporary scholars endorse the phenomenist reading of Sextus. These issues are tricky, however, so much so that only a few decades ago Tad Brennan could still refer to the phenomenist reading as “the traditional interpretation” of Pyrrhonism (Brennan 1999, 63), implicitly attributing it to Burnyeat, among others (i.e., to those who espouse what Brennan calls “the radical” or “rabid” interpretation of Pyrrhonism, which Brennan himself rejects).

such faculties causes our ignorance of the true essence of such things? (E, 2.12, 445)

On this point, I am in agreement with Didier Ottaviani: “Le refus de toute subsistance dans ce que peut atteindre la raison ne signifie pas que la connaissance est impossible, mais qu’elle doit être conçue selon un mode humain et non selon la permanence des Idées divines” (Ottaviani 2007, 68).⁸ Restated in my own terminology, Montaigne distinguishes between ‘everyday’ (human) knowledge and ‘philosophical’ (divine) knowledge. To deny human beings the latter is not to deny that we might possess an abundance of true beliefs that are justifiable in everyday ways; it is to deny only that we possess a philosophical *logos* (a justification or rational account) capable of raising such true beliefs, if true they are, to the status of knowledge strongly speaking.

I would note in this connection that, for the most part, Montaigne’s attacks on ‘knowledge’ are attacks on *la science* (cf. E, 2.12, 319, 443–4), which must initially be conceived, I take it, as a strong (or philosophically loaded) form of knowledge. It is with this strong form of knowledge in mind that he writes,

Now since our seeming is so uncertain and controversial, it is no longer a miracle if we are told that we can admit that snow appears white to us, but that we cannot be responsible for proving that it is so of its essence and in truth; and, with this starting point shaken, all the knowledge in the world (*toute la science du monde*) necessarily goes by the board. (E, 2.12, 452–3)

This denial of knowledge by Montaigne is Paganini’s third and final “famous passage” in support of a phenomenalist reading of Montaigne. It is significant that, in this passage, Montaigne is echoing a view of Sextus’s that previous generations of scholars took as evidence that Sextan Pyrrhonism is phenomenalist. In an early publication, Roderick Chisholm claims, discussing Sextus, that “[a]lthough the sceptic does not deny appearances, he does deny the possibility of knowledge which refers beyond them” (Chisholm 1941, 377). To support this claim, Chisholm cites the following (translation mine): “When we investigate whether the underlying object (*to hypocimenon*) is such as it appears, we grant that it appears, and what we investigate is not what appears but what is said about what appears” (PH, 1.19). Chisholm might also have cited—indeed, he may have *intended* to cite—this passage: Pyrrhonians “say what appears to themselves and report their own experiences (*to pathos*) undogmatically, affirming nothing about external underlying objects (*exôthen hypocimenôn*)” (PH, 1.15).⁹ This passage’s susceptibility to a phenomenalist misreading is rendered stark by Annas & Barnes’s unfortunate decision to translate *exôthen hypocimenôn* as simply ‘external objects’¹⁰—a phrase sure to be misunderstood in our post-Cartesian philosophical milieu.

At any rate, as I’ve already said, it is widely acknowledged these days that such passages, properly understood, do not support a phenomenalist reading of Sextus. Neither, I submit, does the passage from the *Essais* cited by Paganini support a similar reading of Montaigne. The claim that we are ignorant of things in their “essence and in truth”—“cette connoissance supernaturelle et celeste” (E, 2.12, 369); the “sublime cognoissance” of “[l]es inquisitions et contemplations philosophiques” (E, 3.13, 821–2)—is consistent with allowing that human beings possess knowledge of a less exalted sort. Thus, Montaigne can write, without contradicting his

⁸ I thank Stéphane Cormier for bringing Ottaviani’s paper to my attention.

⁹ I say that Chisholm may have intended to cite PH, 1.15 because he erroneously marks the passages he *does* cite, which include a sentence from PH, 1.19 and another from PH, 1.22, as coming from “i, 15–17” (Chisholm 1941, 377).

¹⁰ See also PH, 1.61. There, Annas & Barnes render *ectos hypocimenôn* as “external existing objects.”

disavowals of knowledge, that it is not “impossible that some true knowledge (*notice veritable*) may dwell in us” (E, 2.12, 421).¹¹ *Notices veritable* might also be translated as *true notions* or *true beliefs*—which, as contemporary epistemologists have learned all too well, do not seem in themselves to constitute knowledge.

Montaigne does not restrict human knowledge to *notice*, however. He allows also for an ‘everyday’ (human) sort of *la science*: “Knowledge (*La science*) and truth can lodge in us without judgment, and judgment also without them” (E, 2.10, 297). Elsewhere, he claims (a) to possess knowledge of his own (E, 3.13, 821: “*Ma science*”); (b) that we all have knowledge of everyday things: “Let us consider through what clouds and how gropingly we are led to the knowledge (*la connoissance*) of most of the things that are right in our hands” (E, 1.27, 132); and (c) even that it is possible that human beings can know a thing in its “true” or “original essence” (E, 1.14, 33), the difficulty lying in knowing that one knows a thing in that way (cf. E, 2.12, 369: “The participation we have in the knowledge (*la connoissance*) of truth, whatever it may be...”; E, 2.17, 480: “... there is virtually nothing that I know I know (*que je sçache sçavoir...*)”).¹²

Even skepticism-as-doubt is at odds with Pyrrhonism, at least given a common construal of the psychology of doubt. While it is true that Sextus characterizes Pyrrhonism as *aporetic* (doubting) as well as *zetetic* (investigative) and *ephectic* (suspensive), Pyrrhonism cannot end in doubt understood as an unpleasant or undesirable state of the sort that led proto-Pyrrhonians to begin philosophizing in the first place (cf. PH, 1.12), for that would run counter to the Pyrrhonian goal of *ataraxia* (equanimity), in addition to entailing the more general conclusion that the Pyrrhonian philosophical therapy is, by Sextus’s own lights, a failure. It seems to me that, on the Pyrrhonian view, perpetuation of the sort of unpleasant or undesirable doubt that inaugurates philosophizing is the fate of those who cling to certain dogmatic metatheoretical principles, should they venture to inquire into their *other* beliefs with honesty and philosophical rigor (rather than deluding or flattering themselves by drawing logically unwarranted conclusions). In other words, doubt (if not denial) is the fate of every honest, rigorous philosopher who has not undergone the Pyrrhonian skeptical-philosophical therapy (or a similar transformative practice), for we are all, to borrow Husserl’s apt phrase, “born dogmatists” (Husserl 2014, 141). In Montaigne’s terms: “Presumption is our natural and original malady” (E, 2.12, 330): “The plague of man is the opinion that he knows something (*l’opinion de sçavoir*)” (E, 2.12, 360; trans. modified).

Pyrrhonism is first and foremost a way of life (*agôgê*). It is, among other things, a way of life that attempts to alleviate the tension between autonomous philosophical reasoning (and the doubt it generates) and everyday life (with its psychological certainties and practical necessities). As Luiz Eva puts it, skepticism

¹¹ In Montaigne’s time, the French *notice* could be used interchangeably with *connaissance*. *Notice*, like its English counterpart, goes back to the Greek *gnosis* by way of the Latin *notio*.

¹² These last remarks of Montaigne’s have an obvious connection to the debate in late-twentieth-century (and contemporary) analytic epistemology regarding the so-called ‘KK-thesis’: the thesis that S knows that *p* only if S knows that she knows that *p*. Without wading into the turgid waters of that debate, I would like to venture a few historical observations regarding the whole issue, for they help illuminate the distinction I draw in this paper between ‘everyday’ and ‘philosophical’ knowledge.

As far as I’ve been able to determine, debate on the KK-thesis was stirred up by Hilpinen 1970, which was in part a reaction to Hintikka 1962. In a response to Hilpinen that should have forestalled a great deal of unproductive theorizing, Hintikka wrote (a) “In no case can the acceptability of the [KK] thesis be decided by appeal to ‘ordinary language’” (Hintikka 1970, 141), and, crucially, (b) “Perhaps the strangest aspect of the recent literature on the KK-thesis is the discussants’ frequent failure to realize that the thesis was put forward... only to characterize philosophers’ strong sense of knowledge—knowledge in a sense in which it is contrasted to mere information, awareness, of ‘true belief’” (Hintikka 1970, 142).

properly understood tries to show us “how to conciliate radical doubt and practical life” (Eva 2009, 98). Michelle Zerba makes a similar point: “It is not... the experience of doubt per se that ancient Skepticism names, but rather a manner of handling doubt” (Zerba 2012, 16).

On this issue, I again find myself disagreeing with Paganini’s reading of Montaigne. In addition to construing Pyrrhonism as a negative dogmatism, Montaigne also, Paganini argues, transforms it from a philosophy of *epochê* into a philosophy of doubt. In Sextus, *epochê* is said to give rise to *ataraxia*, which, as I understand it, refers to a state of mental and emotional equanimity. Paganini writes:

In the Greek tradition, *ataraxia* or peace of mind flowed from suspension of judgment... rather than from knowledge and judgment about things. Montaigne maintains the basic avowal of ignorance... However, he eventually ends up by making doubt, instead of *epochê* and *ataraxia*, the climax of [the] skeptical approach. (Paganini 2018, 240)

According to Paganini, replacing *epochê* with doubt precludes *ataraxia*, for doubt leads not to equanimity but to “a state of restlessness and discomfort,” namely, the “discomfort” of “a fluctuating state of mind” harried by “incertitude and hesitation” (Paganini 2018, 240). As we’ve seen, however, included in Sextus’s list of terms suitable for describing Pyrrhonism is *aporetic* (PH, 1.7). In this way, Sextus indicates that there is a sense in which Pyrrhonism ends in *aporia* or doubt.¹³ Specifically, the Pyrrhonian’s *philosophizing* ends in *aporia*, and *aporia* underwrites *epochê*. I find no basis in Montaigne’s work to support Paganini’s breaking of the connection evident in Sextus between *aporia* and *epochê*—a connection that would have to be broken if Montaigne’s skepticism were to lead to *aporia* without *epochê* in turn leading to *epochê*. Furthermore, Montaigne consistently affirms the ideal of suspension of judgment (e.g., E, 1.27, 133; 2.12, 373; 3.11, 788), particularly as a cure for the “plague” of human presumption.

The question of *ataraxia* and its relationship to *epochê* is more complicated, and I cannot hope to address it adequately here. Still, I would like to make three remarks. First, *ataraxia* is not strictly speaking a part of skeptical philosophizing. Rather, it is a result of (or follows upon) *ceasing* to philosophize, as illustrated in Sextus’s vivid analogy of the painter Apelles (PH, 1.28–9). To understand Pyrrhonism as a philosophy of *ataraxia* is to understand it not as a philosophy of *aporia* or even *epochê*, but of that which follows from them. It is, to quote Zerba again, to understand Pyrrhonism as “not... the experience of doubt... but rather a manner of handling doubt” (Zerba 2012, 16). Paganini’s mistake, I suspect, is to conclude that, because *ataraxia* is extra-philosophical in this sense, it cannot belong to Montaigne’s skepticism. But if that were the case, then *ataraxia* could not belong to Sextus’s skepticism either.

Second, there is abundant evidence in the *Essais* that Montaigne did in fact strive for *ataraxia* in a Pyrrhonian sense and in a Pyrrhonian way. Most obviously,

¹³ Paganini suggests that Montaigne’s misunderstanding of Sextus may have resulted from following Estienne, who was following Cicero, in translating the Greek *aporein* with (and understanding it in terms of) the Latin *dubitare* (Paganini 2018, 240). If this were a source of serious misunderstanding, however, then one would expect that the language of doubt would not make for effective translations of *aporia* and its cognates into modern English—yet it does. That said, I agree with Luca Castagnoli that the psychological state of *aporia*, understood as a state in which a person is “unable to either accept or reject a certain proposition as true or false,” is “different from that of doubt, at least if ‘doubt’ is consistent with (uncertain) belief” (Castagnoli 2018, 212; emphasis added). The qualification is important, for the word ‘doubt’ does not pick out a state that necessarily differs from *aporia* in this way. One can (indeed, should) doubt that which one not only does *not* (uncertainly) believe, but outright *dis*believes. Certainly, therefore, one can doubt that which one does not—or even *cannot* (at present)—either believe or disbelieve, such as the proposition “There are an even (not an odd) number of stars in the sky.”

in the essay “That the taste of good and evil depends in large part on the opinion we have of them,” Montaigne considers the “old Greek maxim” that “[m]en... are tormented by the opinions they have of things, not by the things themselves” (E, 1.14, 33). He does not mention Sextus here and may well have had another ancient author in mind. Even so, it strikes me as likely that he is thinking of Sextus’s claim that a primary source of *tarachê* lies in the opinion we have of things: “[T]hose who hold the opinion that things are good or bad by nature are perpetually troubled (*tarassetae*)... But those who make no determination about what is good or bad by nature... are equanimous (*ataracti*)” (PH, 1.27; cf. PH, 3.235–7). Montaigne concludes, as the essay’s title suggests, that this is basically correct. The exception, he argues, is physical pain: “Here all does not consist in imagination. We have opinions about the rest: here it is certain knowledge (*la certaine science*) that plays its part” (E, 1.14, 37). As it happens, Sextus makes the same observation: “We do not, however, take skeptics to be undisturbed (*aochlêton*) in every way. We say that they are disturbed by things that are forced upon them; for we agree that at times they shiver and are thirsty and have various experiences (*paschin*) of that sort” (PH, 1.29).¹⁴

I have argued elsewhere that, at minimum, Sextus’s *ataraxia* refers to the cessation of the troubledness that led proto-Pyrrhonians to philosophize in the first place (PH, 1.12) and that, *contra* Machuca 2006, such *ataraxia* is an essential element of Pyrrhonism.¹⁵ If this is right, then part of the Pyrrhonian philosophical therapy involves recognition that one needn’t settle matters to the satisfaction of philosophy or philosophers in order to live a good and virtuous life or to have the sort of knowledge that such a life requires. Achieving this insight, and the corresponding state of equanimity, is a recurrent theme throughout Montaigne’s *Essais*.

Even so, Paganini argues that Montaigne’s skepticism ends in doubt, which he describes as “a fluctuating state of mind, like incertitude and hesitation”; to doubt is to be in “discomfort” (Paganini 2018, 240). This overlooks the fact that Montaigne is quite clear that his philosophizing does *not* leave him in such a state.

I should certainly like to have a more perfect knowledge (*plus parfaite intelligence*) of things, but I do not want to buy it as dear as it costs. My intention is to pass pleasantly (*doucement*), and not laboriously, what life I have left. There is nothing for which I want to rack my brain, not even knowledge (*la science*), however great its value. I seek in books only to give myself pleasure by honest amusement; or if I study, I seek only the learning (*la science*) that treats of the knowledge (*la connoissance*) of myself and instructs me in how to die well and live well. (E, 2.10, 297)

¹⁴ See also Montaigne’s unmistakably Pyrrhonian discussion of “tranquillity” at E, 2.12, 360ff.

¹⁵ See Eichorn 2014, 135–40. Machuca returns to this issue, further defending his earlier view, in Machuca 2020. I did not engage with Machuca’s arguments in Eichorn 2014, and doing so now lies outside the scope of this paper. Even so, I will say that, as it happens, I agree with Machuca that the search for and attainment of *ataraxia* is dispensable to Pyrrhonism in a way that the other features of Sextus’s description of the skeptical “ability” (*dynamis*) at PH, 1.8 are not. The question is whether removing *ataraxia* from the picture would result in a Pyrrhonism that is fundamentally different from Sextus’s Pyrrhonism. Unlike Machuca, I believe that it would, for as I understand it, *ataraxia* is for Sextus bound up with—indeed, it is a kind of affective summation of—the other, more ‘intellectual’ practical upshots of the Pyrrhonian philosophical therapy, such as “caution, open-mindedness, and intellectual modesty” (Machuca 2006, 138). I suspect that the underlying cause of the disparity between Machuca’s views regarding *ataraxia*’s centrality to (Sextus’s) Pyrrhonism and my own is that I find *ataraxia*’s place in Sextus’s system (*haeresin*) both psychologically plausible and philosophically important, whereas it seems that Machuca does not (cf. Machuca 2020, 436–7). Indeed, Machuca seems to be motivated to sideline *ataraxia* in an effort to convince people that Pyrrhonism may still be an attractive and desirable philosophy to adopt (cf. Machuca 2006, 111, 138).

He writes that “[v]ain glory and curiosity are the two scourges of the soul. The latter leads us to thrust our noses into everything, and the former forbids us to leave anything unresolved or undecided” (E, 1.27, 135). A portion of Montaigne’s *ataraxia*—a sizable portion, I suspect—stems from his untroubled willingness to leave things unresolved and undecided. “What am I to choose? What you like, provided you choose! There is a stupid answer, to which nevertheless all dogmatism seems to come, by which we are not allowed not to know what we do not know (*ignorer ce que nous ignorons*).” Immediately preceding this passage, he writes, “Is it not better to remain in suspense than to entangle yourself in the many errors that the human fancy has produced? Is it not better to suspend your conviction than to get mixed up in these seditious and quarrelsome divisions?” (E, 2.12, 373). I take it that a large part of why Montaigne thinks that *epochê* is “better” than dogmatism is that it is more conducive to achieving and maintaining equanimity; it frees one from “the clatter of so many philosophical brains” (E, 2.12, 383). This is a peculiarly Pyrrhonian view. Far from remaining in “a fluctuating state of mind” that leads to “discomfort,” Montaigne’s engagement with philosophy, particularly his suspension of judgment on the inherent goodness or badness of things, leads him to a “seat of constancy”: “The lowest step is the firmest. It is the seat of constancy. There you need nothing but yourself. Constancy is founded here and leans only upon itself” (E, 2.17, 489).

There is more. The sort of *epochê* that Montaigne advocates—an *epochê* that amounts to recognition of our ignorance and a curb on presumption—would, Montaigne argues, go far toward ridding the world of sources of *tarachê*: “Many abuses are engendered in the world, or, to put it more boldly, all the abuses in the world are engendered, by our being taught to be afraid of professing our ignorance and our being bound to accept everything that we cannot refute” (E, 3.11, 788). Acknowledging one’s ignorance, Montaigne thinks, also works to secure one against prejudice, and “[a] soul guaranteed against prejudice is marvelously advanced toward tranquillity” (E, 2.12, 375).

Third and finally, Montaigne himself explicitly tells us where he thinks philosophizing ends: “Wonder is the foundation of all philosophy, inquiry its progress, ignorance its end” (E, 3.11, 788). Its end is not *doubt*, but *ignorance*, which refers, I take it, not so much to ignorance of this-or-that but to the recognition of human ignorance that goes together with recognition of our shared human condition: “The ignorance that was naturally in us we have by long study confirmed and verified” (E, 2.12, 370). Indeed, Montaigne writes that “recognition of ignorance is one of the fairest and surest testimonies of judgment that I find” (E, 2.10, 297). He refers to the ignorance that lies at the end of philosophizing as “learned ignorance” (E, 1.54, 227), a “strong and generous ignorance that concedes nothing to knowledge in honor and courage” (E, 3.11, 788). I will return to the idea of ‘learned ignorance’ in §§5–6 below.

To avoid confusion, I shall henceforth reserve ‘Pyrrhonism’ for the view I attribute to Montaigne and Sextus, in order to differentiate it from ‘skepticism,’ whether understood as negative dogmatism or as a philosophy of (undesirable) doubt. Even so, these terms will inevitably blur together, for Pyrrhonism, in good Hegelian fashion, contains both kinds of skepticism within itself, as moments of its dialectical unfolding.

3 Equipollence and ‘Pure’ Philosophy

Sextus’s philosophical practice is based on the equipollence method, according to which, as I understand it, (*i*) conflicting claims, arguments, or appearances are set

in opposition while (i) any purely rational means of adjudicating between them is undermined, resulting in (ii) the equality of purely rational credibility among the opposed claims, arguments, or appearances, which, given a commitment to certain metatheoretical principles, calls upon us as rational beings (iv) to suspend judgment.

The first stage involves occasioning, or simply noting, a disagreement or dispute (*diaphônía*). The second stage typically involves unleashing the argumentative batteries codified in the skeptical modes (particularly the Ten Modes of Aenesidemus and the Five Modes of Agrippa) in order to transform mere dispute into rationally unjudgable dispute (*anepikritos diaphônía*). By undermining equally the purely rational credibility of all claims, arguments, or appearances, the skeptical modes give rise to the third stage: equipollence (*isostheneia*). If we are committed to the normative metatheoretical principle that we ought to believe only that which pure philosophical reflection has certified as true—or at least that we ought to give precedence to the results of pure-philosophical (as opposed to ‘everyday’) reflection—then equipollence will lead to the fourth stage: suspension of judgment (*epochê*).

Too often commentators overlook or reject what seems to me to be a crucial point: that for Sextus (as well as Montaigne) this sequence is in the first instance a purely rational phenomenon.¹⁶ Rationality is ‘pure’ when it operates autonomously; it operates autonomously when it stands apart from the prejudices, assumptions, and subjective certainties of everyday life. Philosophers, Montaigne writes, have deprived themselves of the right to appeal to common sense or what Sextus calls “everyday preconceptions (*prolêpsis bioun*)” (cf. PH, 2.246). It is they who have taught us “to accept or approve nothing except by the way of reason” (E, 2.12, 405; cf. 2.12, 440); it is they who, as Sextus puts it, “are obliged to judge dogmatically” (PH, 2.254). Thus, unlike those of us who are “left... in our natural state, receiving external impressions as they present themselves to us through the senses, and... follow[ing] our simple appetites, regulated by the conditions of our birth,” philosophers cannot respond to “the man who doubted heat” by telling him “to throw himself into the fire”; they cannot simply say, “It is true, for you see it and feel it so” (E, 2.12, 404–5).

In everyday life, rationally undecidable disputes are rare, for various means of adjudication are built into the structure of everyday life. The specter of the Agrippan Trilemma, according to which any attempt to establish a justification will end in (i) arbitrary assumption as the only way to avoid (ii) infinite regress or (iii) vicious circularity,¹⁷ is avoided because everyday life comes prepackaged, as it were,

¹⁶ The qualification “in the first instance” is a nod to the important debate over whether Pyrrhonian equipollence and suspension are for Pyrrhonians ‘rational’ or merely ‘psychological.’ For my interpretation, see Eichorn 2020b.

¹⁷ This view of the Trilemma, according to which assumption is the fundamental worry, runs counter to the two far more dominant alternatives. Peter Klein, who presents the Trilemma as an *epistemic* challenge (i.e., as a challenge to our first-order knowledge-claims, the paradigmatic form of which are empirical claims about the world), finds that the central component of the Trilemma is the problem of infinite epistemic regress, with vicious circularity and arbitrary assumption serving to block possible ways of avoiding the regress (Klein 2008). This is by far the most common view. But Luciano Floridi, who presents the Trilemma as an *epistemological* challenge (i.e., as a challenge to our epistemological claims), holds that the central component of the Trilemma is the problem of vicious circularity, with infinite regress and arbitrary assumption serving to block possible ways of avoiding the circle (Floridi 1996, 134). I believe both are correct in their assessments of the nature of the challenge at the level they place it. At the epistemic level, the fundamental problem is that our putative justifiers all seem to call for justification in turn. At the epistemological level, the fundamental problem is how to justify an epistemology without presupposing it. In both cases, however, the overriding concern is to avoid arbitrary assumption. Therefore, I take it that it is the mode from assumption that is the central component of the Trilemma,

with regress-stoppers. Such regress-stoppers are, from a philosophical standpoint, mere assumptions. As such, they require justification just as much as does that which they seek to justify. Nonetheless, in the course of everyday life they possess a kind of inherent (or ‘default’) epistemic–practical authority. Such regress-stoppers tend to fly the banner of ‘common sense’ or ‘the self-evident’ and are thus unable in themselves to settle pure-philosophical questions. It is from here, starting with the alleviation of the tension between pure philosophy and the authority of everyday life, that we can begin to understand skeptical *ataraxia*.

Pure philosophizing is predicated on (1) rejection or suspension of the inherent authority of everyday life, (2) transference of that inherent authority to autonomous reason, and (3) acquiescence in the philosophical appearance–reality distinction. The philosophical appearance–reality distinction is a radicalization of the everyday appearance–reality distinction. The nature of this radicalization is described well by Rachel Barney:

The dogmatist takes the everyday distinction between apparent and real, made in particular cases and with regard to particular respects, and applies it to some general feature of experience, creating an opposition in which the whole pre-dogmatic realm is cast as appearance... The dogmatist is someone who has a specially privileged procedure of investigation, involving the application of his philosophical knowledge. The dogmatist thus views any results obtainable otherwise, the findings of *bios* [i.e., everyday life], as merely preliminary and defeasible, and so merely a matter of appearance. (Barney 1992, 307)

As Michael Frede puts it, the defining characteristic of what I’m calling ‘pure philosophy’ is the creation of “a *global* contrast between appearance and truth or reality” (Frede 1984, 210). Unlike its everyday counterpart, the philosophical appearance–reality distinction opens up the possibility that *all* we ever experience are appearances, that reality as a whole lies beyond our cognitive reach.¹⁸

1. *Rejection or suspension of the inherent authority of everyday life.* As I’m using the term, ‘everyday life’ as an object of reflection can be understood as a system of intersubjectively constituted norms and practices that are self-presupposing and self-grounding. As such, everyday life carries its epistemic–practical authority within itself; it has what I call *inherent* authority. Philosophy begins by suspending or rejecting, in at least a limited domain, the inherent authority of everyday life in order to seek a deeper ground or source of justification within that domain.¹⁹ It begins, in other words, by transforming the unquestioned into a possible object or topic of inquiry. To become a possible object or topic of inquiry is to become questionable, dubitable, or problematic. Initially, everyday life is none of these things. Philosophy becomes full-blown or ‘pure’ when the problematization of everyday life is globalized. Historically, such global problematization has often been helped along by *external intrusion* (e.g., contact with genuine competing alternatives to one’s everyday preconceptions)²⁰ or *internal breakdown* (e.g., the collapse of established norms and practices as a result of some general calamity),²¹

with infinite regress and vicious circularity serving to block ways of avoiding it (regress taking center-stage at the epistemic level and circularity doing so at the epistemological level).

¹⁸ For an interesting discussion of the way in which terms such as ‘nature’ (*physis*) and ‘reality’ (*ousia*) were transformed in early Greek philosophical discourse such that they came to be defined in opposition to everyday twins of those terms, whose meaning was thereby denigrated, see Vernant 2006, 377–80.

¹⁹ Cf. Frede 1996, 19–20; Morgan 2004, 36–7.

²⁰ Cf. Marcondes 2009, on the significance for European intellectual history of the discovery of the New World.

²¹ As Louis Menand writes in the introduction to his history of American Pragmatism, “For the generation who lived through it, the [American] Civil War was a terrible and traumatic experience. It tore a hole in their lives. To some of them, the war seemed not just a failure of democracy, but a failure of culture, a

but (at least in principle) it can be accomplished on the basis of mere abstraction (e.g., by shutting oneself up in a stove-heated room to meditate on the foundation of one's knowledge).

To be sure, even much pure philosophizing is in the business of vindicating everyday life. Such a project is compelling, however, only given an initial suspension or rejection of everyday life's inherent authority. We can see, then, that philosophical claims need not differ in content from everyday claims; rather, they differ in that they arrogate to themselves superior cognitive credentials. Philosophy claims to possess a kind of objectivity, to provide an elevated mode of grasping the world, that the everyday purportedly lacks (viz., the superiority of *logos* to *mythos*, which is perhaps the original form of the dichotomy in the West).²² Our customs and traditions (our beliefs in general) are not to be accepted because they are *our* customs and traditions (our beliefs), but because they are rational or justifiable independently of those customs and traditions (our beliefs). Given a rejection of its inherent authority, everyday life emerges as a problem. When this rejection is philosophical, the problematic character of everyday life is understood such that it is resolvable only on the basis of pure philosophical reasoning. Thus, philosophy is predicated not only on suspending or rejecting the inherent authority of everyday life, but on a distinct manner of doing so.

2. *Transference of everyday life's inherent authority to autonomous reason.* Philosophy proceeds by transferring inherent epistemic–practical authority from everyday life to autonomous reason,²³ the sort of transition Kant championed in his brief “What Is Enlightenment?”²⁴ An underlying idea here is that philosophy presupposes that reality does not unproblematically manifest itself to us. Therefore, our ‘naïve’ or prereflective attitudes require intense scrutiny. Our connection to ‘reality’ must be secured (and can be secured only) through individual exercises of autonomous reasoning.

3. *Acquiescence in the philosophical appearance–reality distinction.* Philosophy's global problematization of everyday life and its commitment to autonomous reason as our sole recourse go hand-in-hand with a commitment to the existence of a *prima facie* gap between appearance and reality, where this contrast covers a broad range of binary oppositions. *Logos*, *psyche* (mind or soul), and *physis* (nature) belong together with *ousia* (reality) and are defined respectively in opposition to *mythos*, *soma* (the body), and *nomos* (convention), which are associated with *phaenomena*.

Thus, ‘appearance’ should not be understood as any sort of substantial intermediary between mind and world. Appearances encompass the full range of how things strike us. As Julia Annas and Jonathan Barnes put it:

Appearing is not something which only perceptible objects can do... [A]n argument may appear valid, a statement may appear true, an action may appear unwarranted... To say how things appear is to say how they impress us or how they strike us, whether or not it is *via* our perceptual apparatus that the impression is made. (Annas and Barnes 1985, 23)

failure of ideas... [T]he Civil War discredited the beliefs and assumptions of the era that preceded it... It took nearly half a century for the United States... to find a set of ideas, a way of thinking, to replace [the pre-war intellectual culture], to find a new set of ideas, and a new way of thinking” (Menand 2001, x).

²² On the *mythos*–*logos* distinction, see Buxton 1999.

²³ Cf. Guthrie 1962, 29: “The birth of philosophy in Europe... consisted in the abandonment, at the level of conscious thought, of mythological solutions to problems concerning the origin and nature of the universe... For religious faith they substituted the faith that was and remains the basis of scientific thought... [namely,] that autonomous human reason is our sole and sufficient instrument for the search.”

²⁴ Kant 1996, 17–22.

Despite their diversity, however, all appearances are, at least if understood *qua* appearances, cut off from reality. The philosophical appearance–reality distinction entails a *prima facie* gap between mind and world, but not in such a way as to specify the nature of their relation. (It may turn out, after all, that the gap itself is merely an appearance.)

The metaphilosophical account sketched in this section suggests a sense in which philosophy can be said to begin with skepticism, namely, skepticism regarding everyday life. This claim is supported by the observation that skepticism regarding everyday life entails, at least if it is philosophical, a commitment to the philosophical appearance–reality distinction, which is the forerunner of Cartesian external-world skepticism. As with Cartesian skepticism, the initial skepticism that underlies philosophical inquiry can be understood as either methodic or dogmatic: it can take the form of either (a) a tool for testing and strengthening our knowledge-claims or (b) a philosophically established fact with which we must come to grips. In other words, either the gap between mind and world—between appearance and reality—is a possible state of affairs that might turn out not to obtain, or it is a (purported) fact that we must somehow circumvent if we are to make claims about the world with a clear intellectual conscience. The first holds out the hope of a swift return to everyday epistemic norms, such as we find in G.E. Moore, or at least an eventual vindication of their immediacy, such as we find in Hegel and Heidegger. The second sets us a more daunting—indeed, perhaps an insurmountable—task. Either way, Pyrrhonism attempts to demonstrate that philosophy (i.e., pure, autonomous reasoning) undermines itself, including its own initial skepticism regarding the inherent authority of everyday life. Thus, philosophy’s self-overcoming underwrites the *return* to everyday life. But this return preserves within Pyrrhonians something of their abortive philosophical adventure. Sextus describes the transformed attitude of mature Pyrrhonians (e.g., the manner in which they give assent) with the term *adoxastôs*, meaning ‘undogmatically.’²⁵ He refers to dogmatists as ‘rash’ and ‘conceited’ (cf. PH, 3.280), which is echoed in Montaigne’s talk of “presumption” as human beings’ “natural and original malady” (E, 2.12, 330).

In the remainder of this paper, I argue that the return to everyday life, in Sextus as well as in Montaigne, is best understood on the model of the circular dialectic as presented by Ann Hartle in her interpretation of Montaigne’s philosophy.²⁶

4 The Circular Dialectic

1. *The skeptical moment.* The circular dialectic begins with what Hartle calls Montaigne’s “skeptical moment” (AP, 16). This moment underwrites the dialectic, for it involves the overcoming of everyday presumption, i.e., “the unreflective milieu of prephilosophical certitude, the sea of opinion in which we are immersed” (AP, 106). The first moment, then, involves rejection of the inherent authority of everyday life.

According to Hartle, the nature of this ‘skepticism’ sets Montaigne apart from the ancient skeptical tradition.

²⁵ On this translation of *adoxastôs*, see Eichorn 2014, 133 fn. 17.

²⁶ Though she does not engage with his work in any detail, it seems to me that Hartle’s dialectical interpretation of Montaigne owes a great debt to Starobinski 1985 (as well as to Livingston 1984). When she introduces her idea of a circular dialectic, she mentions a number of interpreters who have noted a similar pattern in Montaigne’s thought. At the top of her list is Starobinski. (AP, 260 fn. 14.)

The skeptical moment is not immediate disbelief but precisely the refusal to dismiss what is not familiar... Montaigne's "skepticism," then, is not the doubt of the ancient Skeptics, but rather an openness to what is possible and an overcoming of presumption at the deepest level. (AP, 24; cf. 16)

To this I would say, first, that as we saw in §2, it is problematic to associate Pyrrhonism with either doubt or disbelief.²⁷ Second, although Hartle's positive spin on Montaignian 'openness' is illuminating, and I think valid as far as it goes, she overlooks its negative side. Skeptical 'openness' is predicated on suspending judgment regarding (at least some elements of) everyday life, one's "unreflective milieu of prephilosophical certitude." A skeptical 'openness to the possible' means an openness to the possibility that one's very deepest commitments are *false*. It is precisely this kind of skepticism that, I've argued, motivates the turn to philosophy, for it undermines the inherent, prephilosophical authority of our everyday certainties. Where we thought our customs and traditions (our beliefs) were simply part of (or reflected) 'reality,' the natural order,²⁸ they are now shown to be, at least potentially, mere appearances—perhaps little better than illusions. Where we thought we had knowledge, we are shown to be ignorant. Hence, we turn to autonomous reason, to *logos*, in hopes that it can supply the authoritative foundation that we now realize we lack and have lacked all along. Finally, we can see that Hartle has misplaced Pyrrhonian 'doubt' (*aporia*), which properly understood comes at the *end* of any particular philosophical inquiry, not at its inception (cf. PH, 1.7). The doubt to which she refers is simply that which, on many influential accounts, motivates all genuine philosophizing: wonder, puzzlement, uncertainty.²⁹

2. *The rise and fall of autonomous reason.* Having suspended or rejected the inherent authority of everyday life (that is, having begun to philosophize), we turn to autonomous reason for guidance. We transfer our allegiance, bestowing upon autonomous reason the inherent authority we once lavished upon everyday life. Hartle recognizes that this move is virtually definitional of philosophy as traditionally conceived:

We would expect the philosopher first to recognize that the initial sense of certitude about his unexamined opinions is irrational. We would then expect him to examine those opinions in the light of reason, to reject those that prove to be false and retain those that are now established on a rational foundation. Some version of this Cartesian method would seem to be requisite for any mode of thought that wants to call itself philosophical. (AP, 106)

Elsewhere, she writes that "reason inevitably tends to see itself as what is highest in nature, therefore as entitled to rule, and therefore as autonomous" (AP, 141). Montaigne characterizes philosophers as those "who weigh everything and refer it to reason, and who accept nothing by authority and on credit" (E, 2.12, 440); for them, "reason" is "their touchstone for every kind of experiment" (E, 2.12, 405). The success of such 'experiments' would establish philosophical dogmas to replace the everyday dogmas that philosophy rejects. (Again, the two sorts of dogma might have identical sentential contents.) However, it seems to Montaigne (as it does to Sextus and many others) that the philosopher's "touchstone" is in fact one "of falsity, error, weakness, and impotence" (E, 2.12, 405). If this is right, then to what do we have recourse? The suspension or rejection of the inherent authority of everyday

²⁷ I take it that 'disbelief,' as opposed to 'unbelief,' goes together with 'denial.'

²⁸ Cf. Bourdieu's notion of "misrecognition" (Bourdieu 1977, 164–6).

²⁹ See PH, 1.12, 1.26. On the similarities between Sextus's and Aristotle's accounts of the origin and progress of philosophy, see Long 1981, 82–4 and Castagnoli 2018, 217. As we saw above, Montaigne presents a revisionary echo of Aristotle at E, 3.11, 788: "Wonder is the foundation of all philosophy, inquiry its progress, ignorance its end."

life avoided skepticism by transferring authority to autonomous reason. But how are we to avoid skepticism given the failure of autonomous reason to secure itself or its conclusions?

Pyrrhonian philosophers frequently engage in skeptical argumentation, that is, they advance negative-dogmatic arguments that oppose and are intended to rationally balance positive-dogmatic arguments, including arguments based on what we might call ‘pseudo-philosophical’ appeals to common sense or everyday preconceptions. It is because dogmatic readers of Sextus are committed to the inherent authority of autonomous reason that they are unable to envisage any alternative to positive or negative dogmatism and are therefore unable to understand how Pyrrhonians can fail to endorse the negative-dogmatic conclusions of their own arguments. (“If the Pyrrhonians’ arguments are sound, then they ought to assent to them; if the arguments are not sound, then we’re perfectly justified in ignoring them.”) Pyrrhonism offers a two-stage diagnosis of this mistake, a diagnosis that reveals how to avoid the twin perils of dogmatism and skepticism.

First, the initial rejection of the inherent authority of everyday life, and the concomitant transference of that authority to autonomous reason, deprives philosophy of its ability to succeed at the task it set itself, and therefore makes its foundering upon skepticism inevitable. Why? It follows from the notion of rational autonomy that philosophy must proceed without the aid of presuppositions drawn from everyday life. It is precisely this demand that opens up the specter of a global gap between reality and mere appearance. For the Plato of *The Republic*, dialectical reason must ascend to the supersensible reality that lies behind or beyond the delusive world of appearances. In Descartes, where the gap is transformed into one between ‘the dubitable external world’ and ‘incorrigible mental representations,’ the isolated subject must reason her way out of her solipsistic prison in order to grasp anything beyond the present contents of her mind. Again, it is not that all of our everyday beliefs are necessarily false; it is merely that we cannot know or understand them properly if that knowledge or understanding is based on presuppositions drawn from everyday life.

In *The Republic*, Plato describes this cognitive difference as being like that between dreaming and wakefulness:

[A]s long as they leave the assumptions they use untouched, without being able to give any justification (*logôn*) for them, they are only dreaming about what is. They cannot possibly have any waking awareness of it. After all, if the first principles of a subject are something you don’t know, and the endpoint and intermediate steps are interwoven out of what you don’t know, what possible mechanism can there ever be for turning a coherence between elements of this kind into knowledge? (Plato 2000, 533b–c)

But without such presuppositions (most significantly, perhaps, those drawn from and underwriting the veracity of the deliverances of the senses), reason simply has no ground to stand on: it “has no footing or foundation whatever, not even to be sure whether snow is white... whether there is anything, or whether there is nothing; whether there is knowledge (*science*) or ignorance... or whether we live” (E, 2.12, 391), which is why philosophers “are still trying to find out whether there is life, whether there is movement, whether man is something other than an ox” (E, 1.25, 98). A commitment to autonomous reason, to which we’d turned for guidance, “burdens us instead of feeding us... under color of curing us, [it] poisons us” (E, 3.12, 794). Once reason falls away from the “great common road” of everyday life (custom, tradition, etc.), “it breaks up and disperses onto a thousand different roads.” It “grows embarrassed and entangled, whirling round and floating in that

vast, troubled, and undulating sea of human opinions, unbridled and aimless” (E, 2.12, 408). Echoing Sextus’s remarks about sophisms in the final chapter of the second book of PH, Montaigne writes that “not being subject to our ordinary reasoning, such things [i.e., philosophical flights of fancy] take away our means of combating them” (E, 1.32, 159). It is only on the basis of everyday life, only by reinstating its inherent authority, that we can avoid skepticism.

Second, it turns out that skepticism requires a continued commitment to autonomous reason as the sole locus of inherent epistemic–practical authority. Both skepticism and philosophical dogmatism accept the doctrine of rational autonomy. Given this shared ground, their disagreement is relatively superficial. Once we see that skepticism presupposes rationalistic principles of the sort that it ought to reject, it becomes evident that skeptics are insufficiently skeptical, for they stop short of applying their skeptical arguments to the principles underwriting their negative dogmatism. The result of turning skepticism on itself is both obvious and inevitable. The claim that the truth cannot be discovered cancels not only itself, but also any metatheoretical claims underwriting it, such as ‘autonomous reason is the sole locus of epistemic–practical authority’ (the doctrine of rational autonomy). If the exercise of autonomous reason does, by its own lights, end in skepticism, as Pyrrhonism tries to demonstrate, then the result is not skepticism, but the self-overcoming of philosophy. It is at this point that, as Merleau-Ponty puts it in discussing Montaigne, “reasons for doubting become reasons for believing” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 206). As Montaigne tells us, “we should suspend our judgment just as much in the direction of rejecting as of accepting” (E, 3.11, 788).

3. *The return to everyday life on the basis of having overcome philosophical presumption.* The first moment of the circular dialectic involved overcoming everyday presumption. Now, with the self-cancelling of autonomous reason, we are in a position to overcome its more sophisticated twin. Hartle writes that

... the condition of immersion in prephilosophical presumption the philosopher seeks to escape and transcend through reason. For Montaigne, however, deliberate [i.e., ‘pure’] philosophy does not go far enough. Deliberate philosophy simply escapes to another form of presumption, philosophical presumption. His own circular dialectic is thus far more radical than the ascent of deliberate philosophy because it recognizes and engages both kinds of presumption. The return of circular dialectic to prephilosophical opinion preserves both the initial deliberate philosophical break with unreflective opinion and the break that accidental [i.e., Montaigne’s] philosophy makes with philosophical presumption. (AP, 106)

It is crucial that the Pyrrhonian is not unchanged by having traversed this circle. “What makes the circular movement dialectical is the reconciliation of opposites that takes place in the course of departure and return and the change that is brought about in the accidental philosopher himself” (AP, 91). As Sextus makes clear, Pyrrhonism is a philosophical therapy: Pyrrhonians “wish to cure by argument, as far as they can, the conceit and rashness of the dogmatists” (PH, 3.280).

Some commentators have taken such remarks to mean that the Pyrrhonian therapy is designed solely for philosophers, but that cannot be right. To begin with, Sextus describes proto-Pyrrhonians not as philosophers, but as ordinary people, “troubled by the anomaly in things and puzzled as to which of them they should rather assent to,” who therefore “began to philosophize” (PH, 1.12, 1.26). True, proto-Pyrrhonians must become philosophers for a time in order to undergo the therapy; but the therapy is not intended to aid only those who are *already* philosophers. That this is the case can be seen from the fact that Sextus repeatedly

distinguishes mature Pyrrhonians not only from dogmatic philosophers, but also from ordinary people. Most obviously, as we've seen, he cites as one of the primary causes of the troubledness (*tarachê*) that Pyrrhonism claims to alleviate “the opinion that things are good or bad by nature” (PH, 1.27), which is a problem not only for philosophers, but also for “ordinary people,” who are, Sextus tells us, “afflicted by two sets of circumstances: by the [disturbing] experiences themselves, and no less by believing that these circumstances are bad by nature” (PH, 1.29). The key to understanding Sextus's claim that he champions “everyday life... against the private inventions of the dogmatists” (PH, 2.102) is to recognize that the target of the Pyrrhonian therapy is not philosophy, but dogmatism, which comes in both everyday and philosophical forms. Hence, the fact that mature Pyrrhonians acquiesce in the everyday observances *adoxastôs* (undogmatically) distinguishes them from ordinary people as well as from philosophers. Hartle writes that “Montaigne's return to his first beliefs gives him those beliefs in a new way” (AP, 107). This ‘new way’ is precisely that of the *adoxastoi*, the undogmatic or unopinionated.

In conclusion, the circular dialectic, with its twin overcomings of presumption (first everyday, then philosophical), strikes me as an ideal model for understanding the progression of Sextus's Pyrrhonian therapy.

5 The Dialectic of Knowledge and Ignorance

Hartle insists that “Montaigne's movement of thought is genuinely dialectical in a way that ancient Skepticism is not” (AP, 105). By “genuinely dialectical,” she means dialectical in a Hegelian sense. One way in which she thinks that Montaigne's thought differs from Sextus's is that whereas Sextus's ends in *epochê*, Montaigne's ends not just with beliefs, but with *knowledge*: “His return or descent to the familiar allows him to see the familiar for what it is—that is, *presumed* truth—and thus the familiar is no longer simply presumed. He believes what he had first believed, but he no longer simply presumes the truth of what he had first believed” (AP, 118). I take it that, in Hartle's view, Montaigne no longer “simply presumes” the truth because he now *knows* the truth (or untruth, as the case may be) of his everyday prephilosophical beliefs. He certainly makes knowledge-claims, especially in connection with self-knowledge. But it is a mistake to view such declarations as necessarily contrary to Pyrrhonism. Sextus too is willing to make knowledge-claims.³⁰ The question is what such claims amount to.

“Whoever is in search of knowledge (*science*),” Montaigne writes, “let him fish for it where it dwells; there is nothing I profess less. These are my fancies, by which I try to give knowledge (*connistre*) not of things, but of myself” (E, 2.10, 296). Here, Montaigne juxtaposes two kinds of knowledge, one that he disclaims (*science* of things), the other that he claims merely to attempt to provide (*connistre* of himself). This distinction is not as clear-cut as it might seem, however, for providing knowledge of oneself often entails providing knowledge of things. We've already seen that Montaigne allows that we do have knowledge (*la connoissance*) of “things that are right in our hands” (E, 1.27, 132). We might refer to such things, to borrow a Hegelianism, as things as they are *for us*—or, in Montaigne's case, *for Montaigne*.

³⁰ For instance, Sextus writes of Pyrrhonians that “when an argument is propounded in which the conclusion is false, we know (*ginôscomen*) directly that the argument is not true and not conclusive from the fact that it has a false conclusion; and so we shall not assent to it, even if we do not know (*ginôscômen*) the cause of the error. For just as we do not assent to the truths of what conjurors do but know (*ginomena*) that they are deceiving us even if we do not know how they are deceiving us, so we do not go along with arguments that are false but seem to be plausible (*pitanoes*) even if we do not know how they are fallacious” (PH, 2.250).

If this is right, then there is a sense in which “knowledge of things” bottoms out, for Montaigne, in self-knowledge. A similar idea can be detected in Sextus’s claims to the effect that Pyrrhonians say only “what appears to themselves and report their own experiences undogmatically, affirming nothing about external underlying objects” (PH, 1.15); Pyrrhonians “report on each item, like a chronicler, according to how it appears to us at the moment” (PH, 1.4).

However that may be, it seems clear that Montaigne disclaims knowledge of things construed as things in themselves (as *hypocimenôn*)—though, again, he does not claim that such knowledge, in all senses of that word, is unattainable. Even so, he recognizes the possibility of knowing an assortment of things in a weaker sense. It seems to me, following Hartle, that Montaigne considers himself to be knowingly in possession of knowledge only in the sense of a ‘knowledge’ that has been transformed through its dialectical confrontation with ignorance. It is by means of the dialectic of knowledge and ignorance that we arrive at the doctoral (or ‘learned’) ignorance mentioned above. Learned ignorance is the flipside of everyday knowing *adoxastôs*, and it is for Montaigne the end to which philosophizing leads.

1. *The skeptical moment.* The dialectic begins, as it must, in prephilosophical everyday life. The initial, naïve position takes everyday beliefs, at least upon reflection, to constitute knowledge of things in themselves (“presumed truth”). Upon further reflection, however, we find that anomalies or disputes emerge that problematize our everyday commitments. This gives rise to a skepticism that transforms our knowledge into ignorance. Such skepticism engenders a sense of dissatisfaction: we want to resolve the anomalies or disputes. Initially, we turn back to the resources of everyday life. Sooner or later, however, skeptical challenges grow sophisticated enough that they succeed in calling into question for us not just this or that everyday belief, but everyday life as a whole.³¹

2. *The rise and fall of autonomous reason.* Such metaepistemic skepticism cannot be answered by appeal to everyday life. Hence, the inherent authority of everyday life *in toto* is suspended or rejected, and we transfer our allegiance to autonomous reason. We trade in our everyday knowledge for philosophical ignorance, with faith that philosophy will return our knowledge to us stronger and more secure. Unfortunately, autonomous reason fares no better against skepticism. Indeed, Pyrrhonian arguments attempt to demonstrate that it overthrows itself.

3. *The return to everyday life.* The self-overcoming of philosophy leads to the return of knowledge to everyday life. But this knowing has been transformed as a result of its dialectical interaction with ignorance. The reconciliation of the dialectically opposed terms takes the form of conceiving of knowledge as bounded by ignorance. We *know* only against a background of *not knowing*. This means that, prior to having reached this point, no one knows anything in Plato’s ‘fully awake’ sense; and even afterward, knowing is understood as falling short of our dogmatic prephilosophical expectations. Limited though it may be, however, such knowing is fully awake to its own limitations and is therefore not self-deluded. It retains the moment of ignorance within itself. The dialectic of knowledge and ignorance transforms what it means to know such that (a) we do not know anything in the way that that concept was originally understood, and (b) our knowing is shown to be reliant on the unknown, on the unquestioned and undoubted.

³¹ A good modern example is the difference between local, or epistemic, challenges to empirical knowledge (“How do you know that that ‘tree’ isn’t made of papier-mâché?”) and global, or metaphysical, challenges to empirical knowledge (“How do you know that you’re not a brain in a vat?”). Montaigne and Sextus take a different, pre-Cartesian, route to this sort of metaepistemic skepticism; but that route is no less (indeed, I think it is ultimately *more*) effective than its modern variants. For more on this, see Eichorn 2019, §6.4 and Eichorn 2020a, §3.

6 The Unknown Boundaries of Knowledge

Tom Rockmore has suggested that “Montaigne apparently anticipates Kant’s Copernican revolution when he claims: ‘Now, since our state makes things correspond to itself and transforms them in conformity with itself, we can no longer claim to know what anything truly is: nothing reaches us except as altered and falsified by our senses’” (Rockmore 2007, 246).³² Rockmore fails to note that, in this passage, Montaigne is paraphrasing a conclusion that Sextus draws repeatedly in his presentation of the Ten Modes of Aenesidemus. That significant omission notwithstanding, I think both that Rockmore’s surmise is correct and that Montaigne’s (and Sextus’s) anticipation of Kant’s Copernican Revolution is non-coincidental, given Kant’s self-acknowledged indebtedness to Pyrrhonism, not to mention his familiarity with Montaigne. If this is right, then it would seem that Sextus (and by extension Montaigne) anticipated elements of both Hegel’s dialectic and Kant’s Copernican Revolution. This is a bold claim, to be sure, and I cannot explore it further here. I wish simply to suggest the extent of Kant’s concurrence with elements of the Pyrrhonian tradition before turning to what is perhaps the most significant divergence between the two.

Kant maintains that, though “skepticism is a resting-place for human reason... it is not a dwelling-place for permanent residence; for the latter can only be found in a complete certainty, whether it be one of the cognition of the objects themselves or of the boundaries within which all of our cognitions of objects is enclosed” (Kant 1998, 654; *Critique of Pure Reason*, A761/B789). Montaigne, on the other hand, holds that

It is a moderate and pleasant opinion that our capacity can lead us to the knowledge (*la cognoissance*) of some things, and that it has definite limits to its power, beyond which it is temerity to employ it. This opinion is plausible and presented by conciliatory people; but it is not easy to set limits to our mind: it is curious and insatiable, and has no occasion to stop at a thousand paces any more than at fifty. (E, 2.12, 421; cf. 1.27, 134)

The dialectic of knowledge and ignorance does not give us certain knowledge of the boundary between the knowable and the unknowable. That frontier remains disputed. For one thing, as Hegel saw, in order to know the limit, we must have already surpassed it—which, *contra* Hegel, is precisely what it seems we cannot do.³³

This does not, however, prevent us from learning the lesson of the dialectic of knowledge and ignorance: “The ignorance that was naturally in us we have by long study confirmed and verified,” with the result that we have “renounced [our] presumption and recognized [our] natural condition” (E, 2.12, 370). What does it mean to recognize our natural condition? For Montaigne, it involves seeing the everyday *qua* everyday. “I consider myself one of the common sort, except in that I consider myself so... I value myself for knowing my value” (E, 3.11, 788). This Socratic-style self-knowledge—knowledge of one’s own condition, one’s own ignorance—is the “doctoral ignorance that comes after knowledge (*la science*),” as opposed to “the abecedarian ignorance that comes before knowledge (*la science*).” Knowledge, Montaigne says, “creates and engenders” learned ignorance, “just as it undoes and destroys” our initial, prephilosophical ignorance (E, 1.54, 227). The flipside of learned ignorance, then, is everyday knowing *that knows itself as everyday*.

³² This passage from Montaigne can be found at E, 453–4.

³³ Hegel writes that “[s]omething can be known, even felt to be a barrier, a lack only insofar as one has at the same time *gone beyond it*” (Hegel 2010, §60). Pyrrhonism agrees with the first claim (concerning *knowledge* of the boundary of knowledge), but denies the second (concerning the *feeling* of a boundary of knowledge).

The newly emerged third term of the dialectic can be stated either positively or negatively, depending for the most part, it seems, on the context of the utterance. As Sextus explains, “some usages [of language] apply to the sciences and some to ordinary life... Hence in philosophy we will be in line with the usage of philosophers... and in ordinary life with the one that is habitual, plain, and local” (Sextus Empiricus 2018, 98–9; *Adversus Mathematicos*, 1.232). When philosophizing, mature Pyrrhonians will speak of (learned) ignorance; in the course of everyday life, however, they will speak of (everyday) knowing.

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