

DOUBTING THE SCEPTIC

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at showing that contemporary attempts to rehabilitate Pyrrhonian scepticism do not hold water. I claim that a sceptic of this trend gets stuck in two major dilemmas. The first regards her object of investigation. I argue that, if she holds that her object of investigation is the non-evident truth, she will not be able to distance herself from dogmatism. In turn, if she holds that she seeks to establish sense-data propositions, she will not be able to pose herself as an investigator. The second dilemma stems from the sceptical attempt to wipe out dogmatism by developing arguments to the effect that no (dogmatic) proof exists. I contend that those arguments can be viewed either as "good" arguments, in which case the sceptic will be considered just another theorist in possession of an explanation, or as expendable devices, in which case the sceptic will be incapable of carrying out her anti-dogmatic programme. Either way the sceptical position crumbles.

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, the Pyrrhonian sceptic is a person who, after observing the conflicting philosophical positions about all sorts of subjects (*diaphonia*), develops the ability to produce an opposing argument to every argument she is confronted to, the former possessing the same degree of persuasion as the latter (*isostheneia*). After playing this game for some time, she ends up suspecting that any acceptable

explanations to philosophical matters can be produced (*apatheia*) In the wake of it, she suspends her judgement (*epochê*) and limits herself to describing "as a chronicler" merely what appears to her¹ Only in so doing can she reach peace of mind (*ataraxia*)²

The sceptic's main target is the dogmatist, who claims to be in possession of the so called non-evident truth According to the dogmatist, this knowledge is based upon a set of allegedly uncontroversial rules and principles by which, he believes, it is possible to elaborate irrefutable arguments This set is usually called by him 'theory' or 'doctrine' The sceptic endeavours to dismiss any proof of the non-evident truth in order merely to live in and to explore the phenomenal world As Michael Williams says, "scepticism expresses primarily a distrust of theoretical commitments"³

In recent years, a number of commentators have struggled to rehabilitate Pyrrhonism My aim in this article is to impugn some of these attempts by scrutinising the overall Pyrrhonian strategy I shall show that the Pyrrhonian sceptic is unable to tackle two major dilemmas The first has to do with her self-ascribed investigative activity I shall argue in section 2 that, if she defines herself as an inquirer, she will not be able consistently to specify her object of investigation If she searches for the non-evident truth, she will not be able to distinguish her activity from the dogmatic one, if, in turn, she seeks to establish merely sense data propositions, she will not be able to characterise herself as an investigator The second dilemma, in turn, has to do with the status of sceptical arguments devised to set up that no (dogmatic) proof exists I shall show in section 3 that, if the sceptic considers them as self-cancelling, she will have no reason suspend of judgement If, on the contrary, she avoids considering them this way, she will

have difficulties distinguishing herself from the dogmatist once again

2. The first dilemma: the sceptic's object of investigation

A casual look at scepticism may lead us to claim that the sceptic *denies* the possibility of ever finding the truth. Sextus Empiricus, however, dismisses this naive viewpoint at the very beginning of his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. There he states that those "who believe they have discovered it [the truth] are the 'Dogmatists' , Cleitomachus and Carneades and other Academics treat it as inapprehensible the Sceptics *keep on searching*"⁴ Thus, the sceptic does not reject categorically the existence of truth. It is the academic who does so, because he states that any inquiry on truth is doomed to failure.⁵ The sceptic seeks to constitute an alternative route between the dogmatist and the academic. Unlike the dogmatist, she claims that she is not in possession of the truth. Unlike the academic, she refrains from claiming that it is impossible to discover the truth. She just investigates it.

It is uncontroversial to say that a researcher does not possess what he is looking for, and that he avoids stating the impossibility of reaching it. After all, what is the point of looking for something that we already possess, or of stating that it is impossible to get it in the course of our investigation?⁷ However, it is odd to determine what it is that the sceptic keeps on investigating. As Hiley remarks, this is "surprising since we would think that inquiry implies and is motivated by the possibility of achieving one's goal"⁶ This difficulty, I take it, brings out the first major dilemma the sceptic is confronted to, namely, her inability to establish her object of investigation. From the passage

just quoted, it seems that she seeks the truth. Since the kind of truth that Sextus incessantly refers to is what he calls the “non-evident truth”, or that which pertains to the very nature of things, i.e. their essence, it is plausible to conceive of the sceptic as investigating the non-evident truth.

This is confirmed by our comparing Sextus’s definitions of the dogmatist, the academic and the sceptic in connection with passages where the dogmatist is referred to as someone who assents to propositions about the non-evident truth, the academic as someone who repudiates them and the sceptic as someone who scrutinises them.⁷ On occasion, though, Sextus seems to claim that it is futile to seek out the non-evident truth. To do so is to get entangled in the manifold of conflicting opinions, i.e. to play the dogmatist’s game. On that score, the investigation of this kind of truth should be discredited.

“the man who says that something true exists will not be believed without proof ; and if he wishes to offer proof, he will be disbelieved if he acknowledges that his proof is false, whereas if he declares that his proof is true he becomes involved in circular reasoning and will be required to show proof of the real truth of his proof, and another proof of that proof, and so on *ad infinitum*. But it is impossible to prove an infinite series, and so it is impossible also to get to know that something true exists”⁸

It is important to emphasise here that Sextus does not slip back into the academic position when he states that no non-evident truth can be found. He reminds us that, when he says ‘it is impossible to know whether something true exists’, he means ‘[it seems so far that] it is impossible to know whether something [non-evidently] true exists’. That being so, the (dogmatic) procedure of assenting to the truth as well as the (academic) procedure of de-

nying it are irretrievably mistaken. At this juncture, it is worth presenting Hankinson's analysis of that issue. He resorts to Russell's quarrel with Wittgenstein on "whether there is a hippopotamus in my room." We might well conclude that, after "searching diligently" and vainly for one, "there was no hippopotamus in my room (as did Russell)." However, we "might also conclude that, while the search had produced no positive results, that fact in itself could not license a negative conclusion" (as did Wittgenstein). Hankinson believes that, if the "hippopotamus stands proxy for the reality or substance of things", Wittgenstein's position likens that of a Pyrrhonian sceptic "on the question of whether or not there is a hippopotamus in the room he simply suspends judgement — there may be, or there may not"⁹

Hankinson's argument is indeed compelling. However, I believe it is possible to reply to this in the following way. If the sceptic really proceeds as Hankinson claims, the only thing she can say to undermine the procedure of the dogmatist is that he has not yet proved to be in possession of the non-evident truth. But this alone does not eliminate the possibility that he may still succeed in finding a hippopotamus in the room. She may start off claiming that she does not yet know whether what she is investigating really exists. She can say "I neither believe nor disbelieve in the non-evident truth." If this is so, she may disagree with the dogmatist about his pre-established assent to the non-evident truth, but she will not be able to fault him for elaborating proofs of it. To undermine these efforts, she ought to say "the dogmatic project cannot take us anywhere." Nevertheless, it is now clear that she is not in a position to say so bluntly, unless she can add to this statement the expression "it seems so far that..." In proceeding this way, she cannot stop the dogmatist from contending

unmistakably “from my failure so far in furnishing a valid proof of the non-evident truth it does not follow that there is no proof like that” Now, if there can still be a valid proof of the non-evident truth, what is the point of being at odds with dogmatism? If the attempt to produce proofs of the non-evident truth is not undermined somehow, the sceptic will not be able to carry out her anti-dogmatic programme In view of this, her criticism of the dogmatist becomes fragile, which is to say, her own sceptical position ends up falling into pieces at the end of the day

Keeping this in mind, it is possible to take the dogmatist off the hook by contending that what is inappropriate in his view is just the previous commitment to the *existence* of the non-evident truth But nothing in either Hankinson’s or Sextus’s arguments persuades us to acknowledge that the dogmatist is *really* mistaken in thinking that he can produce a consistent explanation of the non-evident truth As a consequence, if Hankinson’s argument holds, the sceptic will have trouble opposing the dogmatist That is to say, if we consider Hankinson’s attempt to rehabilitate scepticism as valid, then we shall have to conclude that it is not possible to use the sceptical procedure against the dogmatist in an effective way

Thus far I have considered what would be the case if the sceptic defined her object of investigation as the non-evident truth Let me now conjecture on her professed intention of establishing propositions about sensory data This objective is more in keeping with the general thrust of Pyrrhonian scepticism I believe though, that the supposition that her object of investigation is empirical propositions collides with the very supposition that she is an investigator I explain myself In order to be considered as an investigator, she has to grant that she has not yet been in possession of that which she is investigating Otherwise it

would be rather odd, let alone idle, to look for something that she already possesses. The fact is, though, that the sceptic does possess empirical propositions. Recall that, after suspending judgement, she renders herself to phenomena, which is to say, she assents to everything that is immediately given. By embracing appearances, she also embraces an awful lot of statements concerning these appearances. When she feels hot or cold, for example, she does not say "I believe that I am not hot or cold"¹⁰ She doubts those explanations that encourage us to go beyond appearances. When she is faced with them, she quickly replies "no explanation seems satisfactory"¹¹ It seems then, that it does not make sense to say that the sceptic looks for the establishment of empirical propositions, since she already possesses them. At this point, it is clear that the sceptic remains unable to obliterate the first dilemma. She cannot be viewed as an investigator of the non-evident truth, because this would undermine her own criticism of the dogmatist. And she cannot be viewed as investigating sense data propositions either, because this would jeopardise her position as an investigator.

The sceptic may argue that she cannot know *exactly* what kind of truth she is looking after at the beginning of her research. To claim she can is to presuppose that she is no longer at the beginning of, but rather further ahead in, her investigation. Actually, this may be said of any investigator. Truth is something that an investigator assumes vaguely in the early stages of his project. Thus, it seems question-begging to accuse the sceptic of either vagueness or oscillation at this moment. Besides, even if she could specify her object of investigation properly, she would commit herself to a theory of truth. Now, since she repudiates any theoretical endeavours, to require her to estab-

lish her object of investigation once and for all is to misinterpret her intentions

I believe, though, that this reply is misleading. As just shown, the question is not that the sceptic's procedure is flawed because its pre-established arrival point is vague. The key issue here is rather that, no matter what the arrival point may be, she will be unable to build up her own scepticism on a reliable basis. In case she sets out to herself the aim of investigating sense data propositions, she will compromise her status as an investigator. If she investigates the non-evident truth, she will not be able to fault the dogmatist for elaborating doctrines. Thus, her standpoint is objectionable because she cannot establish *even vaguely* what her object of investigation consists in.

Before considering the second dilemma, it is worth discussing Hiley's viewpoint on this matter. According to him, Sextus's conception of the sceptic as an inquirer can be properly interpreted if we confine our attention to the incompatibility between scepticism and dogmatism. The sceptic has to be viewed as "an inquirer who resists dogmatism" and in this sense scepticism is a strategy that must constantly be deployed against those who "hold theoretical doctrines, tenets, or principles"¹². The sceptical investigation does not end in discovery. Actually, it does not end at all.¹³ It keeps disentangling dogmatic arguments in order to demolish them. On that score, scepticism is a "parasitic and piecemeal affair"¹⁴. Although the sceptical strategy "does not imply a goal, it does have a purpose"¹⁵. So the sceptic does not envisage a goal. She rather makes it clear that her sole intention is to hollow out dogmatic sand castles. If the sceptical investigation is parasitic on the dogmatic pretensions, then the latter being absent, the former will not be brought about. Actually, if there is no dogmatist around, there will be no sceptic around either.

Sceptics can only exist insofar as dogmatists exist, which means that the idea of a whole society of sceptics is untenable. The *leitmotiv* of scepticism is its antagonism to dogmatism.

This is a standpoint that bears looking into very carefully. At first glance, I find it shaky because it clashes with the idea that the sceptic aims at achieving piece of mind, so that she does have a goal. But this is a minor point, so let us not be so harsh in dismissing Hiley's argument this way. Initially, what strikes us as odd is to consider scepticism as a formula which is dependent upon the very procedure it struggles to undercut. The sceptic seems to be confronting someone whose existence she requires to be what she claims to be. Now, this antagonism cannot be thought of as globally applicable, for it risks an implosion. The sceptic cannot expect to neutralise *all* dogmatic arguments, on pain of eliminating its own *raison d'être*. At the same time, she must carry on antagonising the dogmatist. That is what scepticism is all about.

The sceptic has an answer for that, though. She points out that the sceptic relates to the dogmatist in the same way as medical care relates to diseases. If the later disappears, the former will have no purpose at all. Scepticism is thereby characterised as a therapeutic procedure. Once the dysfunctional organism is cured and the disease is eradicated, the treatment itself is rendered superfluous. I shall refrain from exhibiting my reservations to these remarks right now, since I shall comment on this metaphor in the following section, when I subject the sceptical attack on (dogmatic) proofs to close scrutiny.

For the time being, it is worth bringing up an unbearable outcome of Hiley's solution that can be singled out as follows. It is true that if Hiley is right the sceptic will be able to hold that she is an inquirer while avoiding the

charge that she seeks the truth. This is tantamount to saying that she will easily dismiss the objections I presented earlier. However, the price she has to pay is much too high. The dogmatist elaborates proofs of the non-evident truth. To oppose the dogmatist, then, is to produce proofs that clash with his proofs. So, if scepticism is defined as parasitic on dogmatism, the sceptic will be acknowledged as someone who keeps on yielding proofs of the non-evident truth as persuasive as the dogmatist's.

So far so good. It seems uncontroversial to concede that the sceptic cannot do so without analysing dogmatic proofs. She must be able to pinpoint what they try to establish, what their presuppositions are like and what makes them sufficiently persuasive so as to drag her into the construction of counter-proofs. The sticky point here is that the sceptic can only examine the pros and cons of dogmatic proofs, and at the same time elaborate counter-proofs of them, according to a pre-established, pre-arranged set of definitions, rules and principles that *has to remain unchallenged* in order to be put to work properly. This is so because such a set alone licenses her to employ concepts in a meaningful way. Should this set of presuppositions be questioned, she would no longer be able to safeguard the meaning of the terms that constitute her proofs.

Let me be more clear on that. In order to recognise something as a proof of, let us say, the non-evident truth, one has to possess beforehand at least the idea of what a proof is like, what a non-evident truth is like, and so on. Apart from the logical principles and rules that are required for us to consider a set of propositions as a proof, we need to take account of some conceptual distinctions to identify its content. We can only entertain a meaningful term against a conceptual background by means of which alone definitions can be properly set up. In the absence of

such a background, we could not make sense of what a term stands for, and what it does not. This is equivalent to saying that we could not handle concepts properly and, as a result, we could not know what this concept means. The activity of conceptual analysis forces us to stand back from the mere contents of our present awareness and impels us to take stock of our presuppositions so as to guarantee the meaningfulness of our terms and propositions. The making of a persuasive proof requires access to a set of notional elements *that must be kept untouched* by misgivings of any sort.

Now, the question arises as to how such a set should be interpreted. It must be shielded from sceptical assault for the sake of the meaningfulness of our terms and propositions. But if it is not challenged, then what is the status of these terms and propositions? It seems that they play the role of non-evident truths, since truths of this sort are not under suspicion at all. So if the sceptic cannot help sheltering these presuppositions from her own doubts, she seems incapable of drawing the line between scepticism and dogmatism. She has to admit that, in order to carry out her overall project, she proceeds in the same way as the dogmatist, i.e., she ends up privileging a certain class of terms and propositions that are treated as non-evident truths.

To believe that the non-evident truth is such and such is not, of course, to believe in its existence. As Hankinson suggests, "I may choose to behave *as if* I believed while remaining agnostic on the matter"¹⁶ In this way, the sceptic can reply that she can utilise a fixed set of presuppositions without having to commit herself to its validity. As I see it, though, she will be worse off thinking this way. If she is asked why she chooses this line of reasoning, or why she acts as if she embraced that set of pre-

suppositions, her answer can only be that she has some reasons to do so. Those reasons, whatever they might be, have to take the form of a compromise. Otherwise, why should she embrace *that* set rather than any other one?

On that account, the question raised earlier seems to recede: how to interpret those reasons? What is their status in the debate against the dogmatist? Actually, the sceptic's reply sends us back to the drawing board. She cannot help *believing* that her procedure was previously thought of as indispensable for the success of her whole strategy. Once this belief is unravelled, it can be used as an efficient ammunition against her, in the sense that it urges her to comply with the criticism according to which her presuppositions, by being placed in a privileged, undisputed standpoint, bears the same status as those ones the dogmatist has been committed to all along. And if this is so, dogmatism turns out to be the only game in town. This means that to characterise the sceptic as *merely* an opponent of the dogmatist is to turn her into a dogmatist. Trivially, this can scarcely hold good as far as the sceptic is concerned, since she refuses to pose herself as a dogmatist.

From these remarks it follows that Hiley's solution can only work if the sceptic stops being a sceptic. In other words, if we try to preserve the investigative character of scepticism by making it subservient to dogmatism, we end up ascribing a role to the sceptic that deprives her of her own sceptical position. The sceptic has to avoid being dependent upon dogmatism, otherwise she herself will be wiped out. Thus, Hiley's view that the sceptic is an inquirer of dogmatic pretensions is unsustainable.

It should be emphasised that, even if we grant that dogmatism is the very reason by which scepticism is established, we can still raise a further objection to the latter. The sceptical attack seems to be addressed to those who

believe that they can elaborate indubitable and infallible explanations. This strategy presupposes the view according to which reason is capable of resolving any problems. Reason is then considered as omnipotent and infallible. Now, as soon as this view is questioned and thereafter discarded, I believe that the sceptic's position weakens and eventually dissolves. Kant is a good example of a philosopher who vindicates reason in a non-dogmatic way, by trying to limit the scope of its application. For those, like Kant, who acknowledge in advance that reason is not omnipotent, i.e., that there are a number of problems it cannot solve, I think the sceptical position seems to be unnecessary. Therefore, only the proponents of a certain view of reason and the human capacity of acquiring knowledge can get entangled in the Pyrrhonian net.

3. The second dilemma: arguing against proof

We have seen that the sceptic finds herself in an insuperable dilemma when it comes to the determination of her object of investigation. It is time now we discussed her argument against dogmatic proofs. The sceptic points out that, since

“proof is non-evident, owing to the controversy which exists concerning it, its existence is not self-evident but needs to be established for us by proof. The proof, then, by which proof is established will not be evident and agreed, and being thus in dispute and non-evident it will need another proof, and this again a third, and so on *ad in finitum*. But it is impossible to prove an infinite series, therefore it is impossible to show that proof exists”¹⁷

That being so, one can wonder what the status of such an argument against proof — let us call it (S) from now on — should be like. If it stands fast, or if it is the case

that no proof exists, then at least one proof exists, to wit, this very reasoning by which it is established that there is no proof. The sceptic apparently concedes this charge by saying that, "just as we declare that Zeus is 'the Father of both gods and men' implying the exception of this god (for he is not his own father), so also when we say that no proof exists we imply in our statement the exception of the argument which proves that proof does not exist, for this alone is proof"¹⁸ Come what may, if (S) works successfully against dogmatic proofs, then nothing seems to prevent us from acknowledging (S) as itself a proof, so that the sceptic's anti-dogmatic programme ends up backfiring. That is why dogmatists

"assert that the arguments propounded against proof are either probative or not probative, and if they are not probative, they are incapable of showing that proof does not exist, while if they are probative, they themselves involve the reality of proof by self-refutation. Hence also they propound an argument in this form 'If proof exists, proof exists, if proof exists not, proof exists, but proof either exists or exists not, therefore proof exists'"¹⁹

This is, though, a misguided criticism.²⁰ Sextus Empiricus is well aware of it. (S), i.e., the argument against proof, is conceived of as an expendable device

"Just as, for example, fire after consuming the fuel destroys also itself, and like as purgatives after driving the fluids out of the bodies expel themselves as well, so too the argument against proof, after abolishing every proof, can cancel itself also. And again, just as it is not impossible for the man who has ascended to a high place by a ladder to overturn the ladder with his foot after his ascent, so also it is not unlikely that the Sceptic after he has arrived at the demonstration of his thesis by means of the argument proving the non-existence of proof, as it were by a step-ladder, should then abolish this very argument"²¹

Bearing this in mind, (S) is to be viewed as an instrument by means of which we can be rid of dogmatic proofs and, after achieving this goal, of these very anti-dogmatic instrument, i.e. of (S) itself. It has to be thought of as applicable not only to dogmatic proofs, but also to itself. In this way, Michael Williams says

“repeated failures to establish anything for certain leave the sceptic with the impression that nothing can be known and that it is *wise* to suspend judgement. Though experience has left him with these views, he does not claim that they are true or even justified” he does not make claims or take positions”²²

As matter of fact, the sceptic elaborates arguments with “a peculiar feature they are self-cancelling, being apparently good arguments for the conclusion that there is no such thing as a good argument”²³ This makes it clear that (S)’s fate is already traced from the very start: after achieving its goal, i.e. after plausibly shedding doubts on the possibility of a dogmatic proof, it simply demolishes itself. Better put, if (S) can be applied to destroy all proofs, since (S) is itself a proof, then it follows that (S) cancels (S). This does not worry the sceptic. She is ready to acquiesce in the fact that, after arguing against proof, she ends up doing away with (S) itself, leaving nothing behind.²⁴

As I see it, though, the sceptic stands condemned out of her own programme. We can turn the tables on her by carrying out a second-level assessment of her procedure against the dogmatist. This can be done in the following way. Sextus Empiricus states that what we throw away, what is eliminable, is (S), i.e., the instrument of neutralisation of proofs. It remains unclear whether the result of such a neutralisation is discarded as well. I am referring here to the acknowledgement that there is (or seems to be) no unchallengeable proof. The sceptic’s intention is to pro-

duce a proof that is as persuasive as a determinate dogmatic proof and, in so doing, to give rise to a stand-off on the basis of which she declares herself incapable of bending over either (S) or the dogmatic proof in question. The persuasive force of every proof is liable to be balanced against the persuasive force of a counter-proof. In this frame of mind, she is pushed into suspension of judgement.

Now, the question arises as to how we are supposed to understand the statement 'there is no unchallengeable proof'. Let us call such a statement p . A question like that is worth asking because, as just stated, p is the very reason that leads the sceptic to get dismayed and to suspend judgement. So, if p is not viewed as the conclusion of a proof, the sceptic will have trouble dealing with a criticism to the effect that she is unable to explain why we should doubt all. In turn, if p is regarded as the conclusion of a proof, it will be thrown away. Its proof will be subjected to (S) and this will ignite an infinite regress strategy. This means that the sceptic will be unable to suspend judgement, and to reach peace of mind. When she eliminates p , she seems to be also eliminating the main motive that drove her into scepticism in the first place. It is as though the remedy, after having cured the disease and after having eliminated itself, ended up eliminating the patient as well. More precisely, if it is the case that (S) cancels (S), then it is always logically possible to go back to the proof of p and say 'if (S) cancels (S), there is no logical reason to continue taking the proof of p seriously'. And if p is so considered, the suspension of judgement does not come through, which is to say, a fundamental step in the sceptical overall procedure is rendered meaningless. Once aware of these points, we are allowed to shrug off scepticism.

The sceptic may say that the situation is more complicated than that. She thinks she has an ace up her sleeve

In fact, she claims, (S) applies to all arguments, that is, (S) is applied to the objection above, so as to undermine what I have just said, and so on *ad infinitum*²⁵ This line of thought may be compelling. It propels us to think that any anti-sceptical reasoning is doomed to an implosion. An argument against scepticism yields a counter-argument which yields a reply, and so on. If one claims to possess a definitive response to the sceptic, one condemns one's whole discourse to a never-ending story.

I take it the sceptic misreads my account of this issue. What I claim is that the tool she uses against proofs in general is the very tool she uses to undermine the dogmatic procedure. But if this tool can be used against her own position, then it can also be used to undermine her anti-dogmatic procedure. We can shift the burden of proof from the dogmatist to the sceptic. The sceptic subjects the dogmatist to an infinite regress argument. This instructs us to subject her to the same strategy. So, if her anti-dogmatic agenda yields to an infinite regress, what is then the point of even taking it into consideration anyway? She may state she has no reason to be a sceptic, for any reason she may entertain succumbs to an infinite regress, but then she cannot have reasons to discard the dogmatic position after subjecting it to the same kind of regression. And if she has no reason to discard the dogmatic position, why is it that she advises us to suspend our judgement in order to be rid of dogmatism? On that score, she has to protect p from her own attack, i.e., she has to avoid applying (S) to the proof that p . But if she does so, the proof that p will resist to (S). This means that p will become a "good" argument. Now, this narrows the alleged gap between the dogmatist and the sceptic, since the former also makes use of "good" arguments.

In this way, the Pyrrhonian sceptic is faced with a second major dilemma. In order to be coherent, she has to apply (S) to any kind of argument, (S) included. However, as is clear by now, the self-cancelling character of (S) weakens the anti-dogmatic thrust of p . Since p is the very reason that leads the sceptic to suspend judgement and to reach peace of mind, the self-cancelling character of (S) seems to drive her away from her own scepticism. In turn, if she does not uphold the self-cancelling character of (S), nothing will stop us from acknowledging that the proof of p holds fast and *a fortiori* that the sceptic is committed to unshakeable arguments. Simply put, in applying (S) to the proof that p , the sceptic ends up discrediting her own position, and if she decides not to do so — i.e., if she does not apply (S) to the proof that p , she will not be able to distance herself from dogmatism.

These considerations countenance two different interpretations of the expression “to be a sceptic”. On the one hand, it may be understood as “to be against any kind of proof”. This suggests that the sceptic is also against anti-dogmatic arguments. But this amounts to her inability to oppose the dogmatist. And if she is not viewed as combating the dogmatist, she will stop being a sceptic. The reason is that she will no longer be able to hold p and, as a consequence, she will lose the very reason that drags her into suspension of judgement.

On the other hand, “to be a sceptic” may signify “to be against dogmatic arguments only”. This is tantamount to saying that the sceptic is *not* against anti-dogmatic arguments. But this turns on the question how anti-dogmatic arguments are to be considered. We have an impasse again. If she can refrain from applying (S) to the proof that p she will have to cope with the fact that such a proof functions as a well-founded, unshakeable argument which resists, or

at least is supposed to resist, (S)'s attack. Now, if she possesses a well-founded argument, nothing will distinguish her from the dogmatist, who theorises on the basis of well-founded arguments. To carry out her criticism of the dogmatist, she must endow p of persuasive force and display confidence in her method. She is bound to believe that her procedure is efficacious of that end.²⁶ If she has an explanation, she must be able to say why it is preferable to be a sceptic than to hold other explanations as valid. This is the underlying idea in Williams's statement that the sceptic finds it "wise" to suspend judgement. Consciously or not, Williams tacitly suggests that it is "unwise" to follow the dogmatist. If this is the case, the sceptic will be nothing but another person who holds an explanation to her position and who believes that this explanation is the best one.

Now, if the sceptic concedes that she possesses the best possible explanation to debunk the dogmatist, she will have also to concede that this explanation was reached by means of an unshakeable argument. Since this kind of argument is what theories are made of, it seems plausible to say that her explanations end up being theoretical. This acknowledgement reinforces that one we arrived at in the last section. The sceptic cannot help prescribing precisely that which she claims to be disputing, namely, theoretical pretensions. This is equivalent to saying that Pyrrhonian scepticism is the result of a theoretical activity. Now, if this is so, scepticism will not be distinguishable from dogmatism again. The sceptic will be viewed as adding one more explanation to the mosaic of explanations that characterises the philosophical domain. In so doing, though, she will not be able to hold her own scepticism, insofar as scepticism has been introduced from the very beginning as an anti-dogmatic, anti-theoretical position.

In addition to all these reservations it can be reminded that the sceptic does not just keep evaluating dogmatic arguments. After opposing them, she suspends judgement and embraces phenomena so as to deprive herself of philosophical pretensions. Now, it is important here to notice the significant difference between the vulgar and the sceptic. At first sight, this seems incorrect, for Sextus Empiricus introduces the Pyrrhonians as champions of life. However, the vulgar who never came across dogmatic arguments cannot reach the desired peace of mind²⁷. She is above all a person "of talent" who was "perturbed by the contradictions in things and in doubt as to which of the alternatives" she must accept²⁸. The sceptical tranquillity is a result of this state of affairs, that is, it presupposes that the sceptic has already had the experience of despair because of the clash of opinions stemming from dogmatic projects. Pyrrhonian scepticism is to be considered therefore as constituted by means of the examination of dogmatic pretensions. This examination, as argued for in the preceding section, is not exempt from steadfast presuppositions. Besides, the sceptic criticises dogmatism not only in philosophy but also in every day life. This is because the common man often bases his opinions on principles that he believes to be irrefutable and at the same time he condemns as errors and falsities the opinions which differ from his own.

The sceptic has two alternatives to flee from the criticism that his posture is as theoretical as the dogmatic one. First, she can accept that she possesses an explanation, but from this it does not follow that her explanation is better or more powerful than others. However, this will not do, for the sceptic needs to impugn the dogmatic project. Then she resorts to the second alternative. She can reply that what she questions is a certain kind of explana-

tion, more precisely, that one picked out of a doctrine. She does not have a doctrine. To have a doctrine, it is necessary to establish a set of unshakeable truths and principles. The explanations found in a doctrine always present us with allegedly indubitable solutions. But the employment of her overall sceptical strategy makes her doubt those solutions that are posed as *definitive* answers. And when she takes account of the history of philosophy, for example, she easily finds out that it is not possible to get definitive philosophical answers.

I take it this second alternative is also problematic. Is it not the case that the sceptic, just like the proponent of a doctrine, wishes her position to be definitive, even when she refuses to accept that she is defending truths picked out of a doctrine? If, on the one hand, the answer is positive, then she will end up accepting precisely that which she tries to criticise, namely dogmatic truths, so that she undermines her own scepticism. If, on the other hand, the answer is negative, then she can only adopt scepticism provisionally. In that event, though, she can no longer be a sceptic. One can assume the sceptical position without necessarily being a sceptic. Descartes, for example, resorts to scepticism in the First Meditation with the aim of establishing his chain of certainties by means of which he reconstructs the whole edifice of sciences. Likewise, Kant can be viewed as assuming a temporary sceptical position regarding traditional metaphysics without committing himself to scepticism. Besides, if the sceptic believes that her posture is the most adequate only in a certain historical context, then she may be taken to be presupposing that her position will be replaced by a non-sceptical one some time in the future. But this is not acceptable because it turns the sceptic into someone who is simply looking for the right position, just like a scientist in an era of revolu-

tion or in an era of absence of paradigm, to use Kuhn's terminology This scientist is not a sceptic He only assumes a sceptical position until a new paradigm is created In this way, the sceptic's second alternative does not stand in its own feet If she expects her scepticism to be definitive, she will end up making the same mistake as the dogmatist, who adopts definitive solutions If she refuses to acknowledge the definitive character of her scepticism, she will no longer be a sceptic Wrapping all this up, Pyrrhonian scepticism seems unsustainable and its alleged resting place poses as unreachable

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Keywords

Scepticism, certainty, proof, belief

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Notes

¹ Williams 1988, p 588

² cf O P I, 7–10

³ Williams 1988, p 560

⁴ cf *ibid* , p 3 (my italics)

⁵ cf *ibid* , pp 131–41

⁶ Hiley 1988, p 12

⁷ cf *ibid*, p 13

⁸ O P II, 84–5

⁹ Hankinson 1995, p 14

¹⁰ O P I, 13–5

¹¹ In connection with this issue, Barnes distinguishes two sorts of interpretations of Pyrrhonism – one that he calls *rustic*, by which the sceptic is considered as having no beliefs whatsoever, and another, called *urbane*, by which the sceptic is characterised as undermining merely those beliefs that stem from dogmatic doctrines. Barnes, however, ends up claiming that “the general tenor of the ‘Outlines of Pyrrhonism’ is, I think, indubitably rustic” (Barnes 1982, p 18). Burnyeat agrees with Barnes, while Frede and Fogelin adopt the *urbane* approach (cf Burnyeat 1983, Frede 1987 and Fogelin 1994). From what has been said so far, though, it is clear that the Pyrrhonian sceptic directs her doubts only to a certain class of beliefs, namely, the dogmatic ones, and not to all beliefs. So I also side with the *urbane* interpretation of Pyrrhonism.

¹² Hiley 1988, p 13

¹³ Cf Barnes 1982, p 5

¹⁴ Hiley 1988, p 13

¹⁵ *ibid*, p 14

¹⁶ Hankinson 1995, p 277

¹⁷ O P II, 182

¹⁸ A M VIII, 479

¹⁹ O P II, 185–6

²⁰ cf Bailey, 1990, p 42

²¹ A M VIII, 480–1, cf O P I, 206–209, cf *ibid* II, 188

²² Williams 1988, p 574 (my italics)

²³ *ibid*, p 575

²⁴ cf O P I, 14–5

²⁵ Cf *ibid* 170–2

²⁶ Cf Nussbaum, pp 52–3

²⁷ cf Hookway 1990, p 27

²⁸ O P I, 10–3